BELLE MALORY Wander

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Wanderlove

By Belle Malory

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Part One Remembrance

"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

ONE

"Goodbye, my half a million American dollars."

A whimper and a small sigh escaped my best friend's lips as she longingly stared out into the darkness. She made it a point to put her emotions on display, just in case I didn't already know how she was feeling.

A few paces ahead, a row of brand-new Mercedes-Benz cars gleamed in the moonlight. The automobiles were all of next year's models- sleek, sophisticated and tragically unattainable. I watched as Lina's brown eyes grew practically teary with remorse as she stared at them. I, on the other hand, lifted a high brow, annoyed by my friend's sudden display of regret. Now was definitely not the time for doubts.

"Are you trying to make things worse?" I whispered the question heatedly. Had I been warned she would spend the night bemoaning our losses, I might have reconsidered what I was about to do.

I immediately regretted snapping at her. The dramatic farewell shouldn't have come as a surprise. It was just like Lina to react this way. After all, Lina Drynski had been my lifelong friend. No one knew her as well as I did. And I knew she habitually freaked out during the eleventh hour. I should be used to it by now.

Maybe it was because tonight was so different. Tonight was important. The big moment of truth was here and I depended on Lina

to make the right decisions. Every move was crucial in this stage of the game.

She'll be fine. She always gets it together, I reminded myself. Thankfully, and almost in sync with my thoughts, Lina squared her shoulders and inhaled a deep breath. Good, she was getting a grip.

Now if only I could do the same. . .

"Course not, love," Lina finally answered my earlier question. She patted my arm comfortingly. "Just needed a moment, that's all."

I looked back towards the transport carrier, feeling my legs tremble a little. Assured now that I wouldn't have to console Lina, I was once again confronted with my own nauseating bout of panic. It settled around me like an oppressive fog, causing me to question everything I'd planned over the last few weeks.

Last chance to change your mind, I offered myself, dangling the decision as if it were the fruit of temptation. Surely, I was the kettle in this scenario. I had no right to criticize Lina's hesitation- my own was far worse than hers could ever be. I only hoped I was better at hiding it.

"We have about thirteen minutes before the cops get here," Lina announced, interrupting my internal debate. She moved to point to one of the cars. "Do you think you can handle the CL-Class on the bottom rack?"

Dazedly, I squinted, searching for the vehicle she mentioned. "The black one?" I asked.

"That's it," she confirmed. She paused for a brief moment to regard me. "Hey, are you okay, Lo?" There were traces of concern in her voice. Maybe I wasn't hiding my emotions as well as I'd thought.

"I'm fine," I assured her.

It was a blatant lie.

Because as much as I wanted to be fine, I was secretly experiencing a nervous breakdown.

Redirecting my train of thought, I focused on removing the car from the carrier. I hoped the task might calm me. *It's such a beautiful car*, I thought while looking it over. I hated knowing that I would enjoy taking it. My father was to blame for moments like this one. He'd somehow managed to instill a wicked streak in me. The rush spreading over my body, the racing of my exuberant heart- it was entirely his fault. I wish I'd never known the excitement of this moment.

"When you get it on the ground, you're going to head east,"
Lina instructed me. "The cops will be coming from the west, which
leaves you no other route."

"I'll have it down in five."

I moved quietly, practically unnoticeable in the darkness of the night. Lina and I both wore black and our clothes were skin-tight. Normally we opted for colorful, vibrant and flowy fabrics. But we were instructed to become invisible tonight, a direct order from my father, Christo Moori. General rule of thumb was to adhere to Christo. Even I, his only daughter, was not beyond facing the consequences of upsetting him.

I couldn't help thinking that after tonight my father wouldn't just be upset. After tonight, the wraths of hell would undoubtedly be unleashed. So, of course, I was terrified. Maybe I'd finally lost it. Yep, that had to be it. I must be insane.

I glanced at my watch. Only four minutes remaining to get this car down, which meant that I didn't have any time to reflect on my sanity or lack of it. I needed to get moving.

When we were working these types of jobs, I never wandered too far from Lina. She had one of the most remarkable gifts I'd ever encountered. A psychic at the purest form, Lina could see into the immediate future. Through study of her skill, we found she could see as far as an hour ahead, unless people changed their minds or spontaneously decided to do something unusual. For the most part though, she was my father's best asset, especially for a job like this. Tonight we would be stealing a prime load of brand new Mercedes-Benz's that were being shipped to Palm Beach, Florida. . .or we would have been able to steal the load. However, I had other plans. And unfortunately for my father, those plans didn't correlate with his.

Since I didn't have any unique foresight to match Lina's, I learned to pick up a few skills of my own. However, interfacing an advanced security system like the kind set up on these particular vehicles had never been a strong point of mine. If it was just a simple matter like breaking a window and hotwiring a car, I was completely capable. But hotwiring was not going to work with a keyless entry, fully equipped, luxury car.

Lucky for me, my father intercepted a package of microchipped keys that had been sent to the Palm Beach dealership separately from their shipment of vehicles. All I needed to do was press the unlock button and I'd be set to go. I could manage it easily enough. I would have the car down in time, validating Lina's vision.

I unhitched the car from its mount, allowing it to roll to the ground, and trying to remain as quiet as possible. Should one of my father's men catch on to what I was doing, I'd be done for.

When the car was on the ground, I went to find Lina. She held the key in her pocket. The key to my escape.

It's almost over, I couldn't help but think. Soon you will be long gone. Soon you will have actually gotten away with this.

A difficult concept to process.

I carefully tiptoed around the drooping truck driver. He'd been left on the backside of the truck, his back leaning against the frame. The poor guy out had been knocked out cold. I shuddered, trying not to look straight at him.

An unexpected clicking noise broke through the silence, startling me. I stiffened, looking around in the dark.

The sound came from behind the car. I strained my eyes to see what had caused it.

Lina's figure appeared as she stepped closer to me and I breathed a small sigh of relief. Shakily, she handed me the key.

I could sense Lina's anxiety had also grown. Everything was riding on her vision and she realized it. One bad move could send us

spiraling into an epic failure. She had every right to be fearful. Should things go wrong, I wouldn't be the only one held accountable.

I further suspected Lina didn't want to see me leave, though she knew as well as I did that it had to be done. She was doing her best to hide how she felt, endearingly.

"Are you positive this is what you want?" Lina questioned me uneasily.

"Yes," I told her with resolution. "This is what I want."

She unconsciously bit her bottom lip. The sadness in her expression brought me out of the surreal daze, which had been hovering around me. In all honesty, I was sad, too. Lina had been my closest friend for my entire life. Lina and Lola. Always together. Two of a kind. And from what she had told me, we'd been friends in many different life times.

"I guess you better leave now, before he figures it out."

I nodded in agreement, grabbing my satchel and opening the door to the shiny, black Mercedes I just participated in the theft of.

Before I got in, I turned back towards Lina and hugged her, squeezing her until she was breathless. Over her shoulder, I whispered, "Do me a favor?"

"Sure. Anything."

I swallowed, fighting back any tears I'd been harboring. "Tell him it's nothing personal. Tell him I love him."

"He knows that, Lo."

"He will forget."

I got into the car and started the engine. As it purred to life, I rolled down my window.

"Take care, Lina."

"You too. And remember-- don't take the turnpike or the interstate. Get rid of the car when you reach Pensacola."

"I will," I promised her.

"Drive fast. They will try to come after you."

In response to that statement, I rolled up the window and stepped on the gas pedal. The brand-new tires screeched as I turned onto the highway. The car picked up speed wonderfully.

I tried focusing only on driving, if that was possible. At least there was a bright side to all of this. I was able to make my escape in the most bad ass car I'd ever driven. I would assuredly lapse into a heart-wrenching depression when it came time to leave it behind.

Throwing caution out the window, I drove at ninety miles an hour down the highway, which twisted narrowly through the dark Tennessee mountainside. It was still very early, barely five o' clock in the morning. The road was empty, save for a blanket of mist that covered the dewy ground alongside it.

Daylight was on the horizon and Lina mentioned I would need to get as far away from Nashville as I could while it was still dark. This way it would be harder for my father's lackeys to make out where I was headed. Not impossible, just harder. Although if I could make it to Florida by the time the storm struck, I would be golden. That's why this escape was so perfect, and it was why I had no choice but to act when I had. Mind readers can't see inside your thoughts

while it's raining. So it would be nearly impossible to see inside my head in the middle of a tropical storm. With any luck, it might even turn into a fully-fledged hurricane.

Elated, I began to realize that I was actually going to get away.

And then, as per usual, my elation quickly left me as I thought of my father. He would never forgive me for this. Not only because I was betraying him, but also because he would end up in jail for trying to hunt me down.

"Damn," I muttered, feeling wretched. I wasn't supposed to feel like this. I was supposed to be relieved, reveling in this moment. I had just escaped a nightmare.

Christo brought this upon himself, I reminded myself, hoping to feel consoled.

It didn't work.

So I turned the knob up on the car stereo, hoping some music might tune out my doubtful thoughts.

I still couldn't keep the guilt at bay. Dimly, I wondered if I would ever be able to hide from this betrayal. For the millionth time it seemed, I questioned myself on whether or not I was making the right choice.

As if on cue, my cell phone rang. I turned down the stereo volume and picked up the phone carefully, afraid of the thing. When I didn't answer, the screen displayed a new text message.

It was from Dad.

Weighing the phone in my hand, I debated whether or not to read it. I drove for nearly three miles before I finally decided.

In the end, I opened the window and chucked the phone out of the car.

Out of my reach.

I didn't want to know.

I couldn't face the consequences of what I'd just done.

Getting rid of the Mercedes proved to be the worst possible idea. I found this out in Pensacola after I'd already ditched the car. I located the nearest bus station, hoping to find a one-way ticket to Clearwater. Apparently, bus routes are canceled during tropical storms. The entrance to the building was locked and a sign read that the station was closed for the evening. I groaned. Of course the bus station would be closed. I wondered why this sensible deduction had never crossed my mind earlier. I ended up retreating back to the Mercedes, deciding to take my chances with it.

I stayed off the major highways, choosing to take the back roads instead. Lina warned me to stay out of sight. The back roads proved to be far more dangerous though. The storm was raging through the area now, needling rain beating against the car furiously. I had only just made it out of Tampa when the road flooded completely. It was coming down so hard, I could barely see anything through the windshield.

A giant oak tree that had fallen across the way came into view at the last second. My heart stopped. I slammed on my brakes, feeling the tires hydroplane. Luckily, the car stopped just in time.

I breathed heavily as the full impact of what might have happened hit me. A few minutes passed before I stopped shaking.

Once I calmed down, I realized that there was no way I could get around that tree in such a tiny automobile. But I'd prepared for anything. I pulled out my raincoat, quickly slipping it on and raising the hood over my head. I'd come too far to stop now. My determination demanded that I continue, even if that meant finishing this trip on foot. My grandmother's house was probably about ten to fifteen miles from where I was parked. I could either walk the rest of the way or find some shelter and then call her in the morning. I would've had to leave the car behind sooner or later, anyway.

Walking proved to be a fatal decision. I walked for nearly five miles before I came face to face with my untimely death.

The rain had been pouring relentlessly. I could barely see a foot in front of me. A ledge by the road dropped off into a ditch nearly ten feet below the ground. By the time I realized this, my footing caught on a tree branch. I fell straight down, hitting my head upon a hard stone.

Numbly, I stared up into the trees and sky, maybe in shock.

This is it, I realized. I'd'come so close, yet I was still so far.

And now I was nearing the end of my life.

This life, anyway.

It was really no wonder I couldn't seem to recall my past lives if this was how I spent them all. Larceny. . .crime. . .dishonoring my father. Who would want to remember such an existence? I probably shouldn't even try. The world would be a much better place with one less gypsy in it.

I felt a wetness on my scalp, near my temple. I was certain it wasn't the rain. Too warm and too sticky. I knew I should try to find help, and I attempted it, but that turned out to be one big catastrophe. A cloud of dizziness swarmed over me like a hive of angry bees. It was too much to bear. My earlier burst of determination faded entirely. My body spent, I sank back into the muddy ground, giving up. I found if I remained very still, the pain was almost bearable enough to attempt sleep. I closed my eyes, feeling the rain drops pour over my face. I prayed that if there was a God, that he would please grant me sleep while I died.

I tried to remember the words to Zetta's lullaby through my cloudy brain. It was such a pretty song. I began to sing the words aloud as I closed my eyes, willing myself to grow tired. I'd fallen asleep a thousand times before as Zetta had sung to me, so I knew each word by heart. And yet, I wasn't even sure what the words meant. It was just an old Romanian lullaby. But the lyrics were still so lovely to me. Zetta's voice had always sounded very tranquil as she sang it. She added a certain mesmerizing, somewhat dreamlike quality to the tune. I tried my best to mimic her, hoping I would drift off quickly, hoping that I wouldn't have to feel the pain of death.

I wondered how much it hurt, the part when the heart stops beating. . .

Suddenly, it was as if I had no weight. I was floating with breeze as it carried me away. Someone's talking, saying something. . but I had thought I was alone. As I found the courage to open my eyes, I saw him.

He was an angel, sent to deliver me to the next life. Only angels could look like he did. So beautiful, so perfect. . .I lifted my hand to touch his face, to make sure he was real.

He was real.

"You're going to be all right!" he told me, trying to shout over the storm. Yet his voice seemed muted, fading in and out. Or maybe I was the one fading. It certainly felt like I was going to black out at any moment.

"I'm going to lift you now!"

His strong arms enveloped me and I felt him lift me to his chest. Warmth. . .it was truly satisfying just being surrounded by his warmth. Curiously, I wondered if the beautiful angel was taking me to heaven. It didn't seem possible I would be sent there. Unless he was a dark angel, transferring me to hell. Now *that* I could believe.

"Is she okay?"

More voices flooded in to my foggy world. They became a little clearer, one by one, each of them distinctly male.

"She has never had a strong tolerance for pain," one of them noted loudly.

I heard a car door shut. The constant droplets of rain no longer needled me along my face and arms. I sensed we had moved into some sort of vehicle. When did that happen?

"I felt a small lump on her head and a cut by her temple."

"She must have fallen from the ledge by the road. Damned long fall, if you ask me. You sure there is no other damage?"

I could feel the pressure of the angel's hands carefully checking my arms, my legs, and then rotating my wrists and feet. I could hardly understand why angels would check for broken bones. I guess I must not be dead, after all.

"Just a few scrapes and bruises." Then I heard a sigh, sounding strangely like relief. "Nothing serious."

The voices carried on, though I drifted off. I was exhausted.

And whoever these strange men were, it seemed they didn't mean me any harm.

TWO

Pink flowered curtains. Lavender scented pillows and sheets.

An antique bookshelf filled with a collection of Jane Austen and several cook books. I blinked a few times, trying to piece together my surroundings. I didn't freak out like some people would have. I suppose I was used to it by now, constantly waking up in different places.

As I absorbed the traces of familiarity in this bedroom, I quickly realized that I was in my grandmother's house. This room hadn't changed since I'd last been in it. But. . .how did I get here?

Slowly, I began to sit up. An intense pain in the back of my skull began to throb. I immediately leaned back against my pillow.

Whoa. I knew that type of pain wasn't an average headache.

Carefully, I ran my fingers over the back of my head, searching for the source. Sure enough, I felt a small lump bulging from my scalp. I fingered the wounded area, feeling threadwork running along the cut. Someone had stitched my head back together. I was grateful not to have been conscious for that.

I wasn't sure what had caused the wound. Things were not entirely clear. I knew I had been trying to get here- to my grandmother's house. I was on my way. . .but never made it.

Something awful happened, delaying me.

Oh yes, it had something to do with the water in the road. The image of a flooded highway appeared in my foggy mind, a giant tree sprawled across the way. I remembered leaving my car behind. . .

But how did I get hurt? I pressed my mind for answers, trying to sort things out piece by piece. I could remember everything up until the time I decided to walk. But afterwards. . .I had no idea.

The doorknob slowly twisted, catching my attention. It creaked open and my grandmother stepped inside the room.

"You're awake," she said, beaming. "How do you feel?"

The sight of my grandmother was so achingly nice. Everything about her put my body at ease, even the sound of her voice. It meant I didn't have to run anymore. It meant I was safe.

"Like a train wreck." My own voice surprised me. It was nothing more than a hoarse whisper. I wondered how long I had been asleep. Judging from the soft amber hues of the sunlight streaming in through the nearby window, I assumed it was nearly evening.

"Here, take this." She handed me a glass of water and some aspirin. I gratefully obliged. My throat felt so dry, like I hadn't had anything to drink in weeks.

After downing the entire glass, I glanced back towards my grandmother. She had placed her wrinkled hand over my forehead, checking my temperature. Oddly enough, her hand was the only part of her body that was wrinkled. She still looked as beautiful as I remembered.

"Either you haven't aged one day since I last saw you or you've made friends with your plastic surgeon."

She made a noise, sort of like a *humph*. "I haven't had any surgeries, little girl. This is all natural."

I raised a skeptical brow. I highly doubted she was telling me the complete truth.

"Unless you count a few Botox injections."

I smiled. Miriam West was the epitome of perfection at all times. I never once caught her with a hair out of place, which, I noticed should have been peppered with gray by now. Instead she had locks the color of glossy mahogany. That was Miriam though, the woman who refused to age.

She pushed her lenses closer to her eyes to better observe me. Her eyes were still clear, with the same warm shade of brown I remembered.

"Well, you look like you did quite a bit of growing up since the last time I saw you. Apparently you're not a little girl anymore. How old are you now? Fifteen?"

"Seventeen," I answered her promptly. "You already know that."

She chuckled. "I see you have turned into a little lady. You've become quite stunning, my dear. Even for the train wreck you claim you are."

Miriam always knew how to cheer people with flattery.

"Thanks, Grams."

Then, with a note of seriousness in her voice, she took my hand and asked, "So what happened, Lola?"

What happened? The question seemed so simple. I shook my head. I couldn't speak, couldn't get it out. And if I said it out loud, it became true. If I acknowledged it, it meant it was real.

I didn't want to be the daughter who betrayed her father. I didn't want to tell Miriam I was a person who could do that.

"Can I stay with you for a while?" was all I could manage to say.

"Of course." Her answer was without hesitation. The tears I had been harboring for the past few weeks began to water in my eyes. It was a bizarre sort of thing. I rarely ever cried.

"I really appreciate it."

"Child, don't thank me for something you never had to ask me for in the first place. My home is your home. You should know that by now."

In truth, this house was the only real home I'd ever known, even though my father would hate to hear me admit it. "Your home is the world, Lola," he told me on a regular basis. That was our firm belief. We didn't live like Miriam did. We didn't conform to the norm.

"You're going to have to tell me eventually, you know. I suspect it won't be long before I hear from your father."

I nodded. I owed it to her to explain everything. As much as I didn't want my grandmother, or anyone for that matter, to know what I had done.

"I just need a few moments to pull myself together," I admitted uncomfortably.

"You can tell me over dinner."

"I will," I promised. "Hey, how did I end up here, anyway?"

Miriam shifted, looking away from me. "My neighbors found you." She didn't offer any further explanation, almost like she didn't want to explain.

But then I remembered- the angel! The night was coming back to me now. I shook my head at the revelation. I'd thought the angel was merely a projection in some strange dream. A figment of my imagination. "So someone that beautiful really does exist."

"Pardon?"

Too late, I realized I was voicing my thoughts aloud. "Oh, nothing," I said. "How did they find me?"

"You mean how did they find you in the tropical storm you were insane enough to venture into *on foot*?"

My face began to heat with embarrassment. I suppose I hadn't put much thought into my actions during my momentary lapse of sanity.

She shook her head, clearly in disapproval.

"Get dressed, little girl. There are some clothes in the wardrobe. All we could find on you was your handbag. I put it in the drawer of the nightstand."

"I left everything," I said. "Except for a little cash and a few necessities."

She nodded. "I'll take you into town when you're feeling better. I don't think you have a concussion, but we should go to the hospital, just in case. I cleaned and stitched that gash on your scalp, but Lord knows I'm not that great with a needle."

"No," I asserted with great emphasis. "No hospitals."

Miriam clicked her tongue. "What is it with gypsies and

hospitals?" she scoffed, leaving the room.

After she was gone, I attempted to sit up again. The pain hadn't dulled, but this time I was prepared for it. I suffered through the throbs, thinking maybe I even deserved them.

Upon hearing the news of the storm, I thought it was a great opportunity. I'd been planning to run away for a while and figured this was fate giving me the chance. I thanked my lucky stars, feeling as if the universe had aligned itself perfectly, just to create my avenue of escape. But the sense of luckiness I felt earlier seemed to be drifting away. A nagging sense of guilt was left in its wake.

My father had probably decided he hated me by now. . .I bet he also decided to disown me.

I shook the thoughts away from me, cringing. No need to dwell on it. Carefully, I stepped out onto the cool tiles of the floor. Miriam's entire house was tiled. She insisted tiles were the best defense against the southern heat. Ironically, a bead of sweat ran down the length of my face. The fan was on full blast, but it was still dreadfully hot. I recalled that Miriam rarely used the air conditioner. Honestly, someone should point out to her that air conditioners were actually the best defense against heat.

I moved towards the wardrobe, slowly but surely and checked it to see if there were any clothes that would fit. I brought about five hundred dollars with me, saving it for this very purpose. Once I decided to abandon my troupe, I knew I would need to leave my

belongings behind. Not that I had ever had that much to begin with. Those I'd been raised around were not the type of people to acquire many things.

Surprisingly enough, most of the clothes I found in the wardrobe were mine. But unfortunately, everything I found was from my childhood.

About seven years too small, I thought ruefully.

I looked over all my old clothes, lightly touching the fabrics and reminiscing. I used to love visiting my grandparents' house as a child. It was a shame my father decided to travel so far from the states in recent years.

I wondered why Miriam had stored these clothes for so long. There was nothing that would fit me now, of course. It seemed strange that she never threw them out.

I looked down at myself to view what I was currently wearing. It was a silky kimono-like robe. Cherry red with white and pink flowers. Stylish, I mused. Apparently Miriam had good taste in robes. Sighing, I slipped on a pair of house slippers. It was only dinner with Miriam. Who did I really need to impress? All I needed was a hot shower and I could eat dinner in my towel for all I cared.

With that decision firmly made, I found my way to the bathroom. I tried to shower quickly, but the ache in my head continued to be a nuisance, slowing me down. I could only make very small movements without feeling a sudden stabbing sensation.

Beyond the physical pain, I desperately tried to keep the recent events out of my mind. But now that I was alone and at the end of my

journey, the last memories I had of my father and my troupe seemed determined to haunt me no matter what I did.

I couldn't help the tears.

As last night's memories became clearer, they flowed freely down my cheeks. It was strange. I could usually keep myself from getting so emotional. I couldn't understand why it was proving so hard this time. I slowly slid down the tiles in the shower, crouching by the drain...I cried and cried as it came back to me... but since I was apparently losing it, I was at least thankful to be able to cope in private.

I wished I could force the memories out of my mind. I wasn't sure if I felt guilty or responsible. I didn't know why it bothered me so much at this point. . .I'd known for a while that it would all come to this. My Auntie Zetta had come to me with her visions of my father behind bars weeks ago. I hadn't known what she was talking about at the time. Her vision appeared long before I had even begun to plan my escape. But I remembered it as if it were yesterday. . .Zetta roused me from my bed in the middle of the night. She pulled me up forcefully, shaking me awake. Her expression was grim. Something was wrong. Lines of worry were etched into her face.

Confused, I let my elderly aunt guide me to the bathroom, where she proceeded to turn the showerhead on full blast. She spoke so softly I could barely make out what she was saying.

She told me not to feel guilty, and that it was time for me to leave. She told me my father would find a way out of jail. It would be my fault, yes, but he wouldn't be locked up for a long period of time.

Zetta had yet to be proven wrong. Her visions were without fail, spot on.

Maybe I felt like if I hadn't taken the chance to escape, then my father wouldn't have ended up in jail that night. But it didn't matter. His men would figure out a way to break him out. They'd done it before and I was positive they could easily do it again. Maybe what was really bothering me was the most freeing sense of relief I'd felt after finding out he would be imprisoned. After all, his arrest was the most likely reason I had enough time to get away.

I probably shouldn't be so pleased with myself while my father was trapped in a jail cell somewhere. It was the most horrible of all punishments for a gypsy to be incarcerated.

To not have the freedom to roam- it was considered torture.

I deserved to get trapped on that road in the midst of the raging storm. I probably deserved to die, too. So why was I alive? How did the angel find me? There were so many unanswered questions. . .

It took a long while, but eventually, I dragged myself from the shower. Then I had to face my reflection in the mirror.

Who are you? I silently asked the person staring back at me.

Jet black hair. Bright, sapphire eyes. Full, pink lips. My image appeared much more innocent than my black heart truly was. Perhaps, not my body though. My body was lithe, yet curvy. Too curvy- I hated it. When I tried to lose weight, it never worked. I love food too much. And when I tried to gain weight, I would never gain it in the places that would dull my buxomness. Instead, I became bustier and my hips became rounder, which made my waist appear tinier. I

suppose under normal circumstances I would feel lucky. Confident, even. But my appearance never served me.

It started with Luca, my father's favorite lackey. Because my father favored Luca, I'd been engaged to him from the age of fourteen, though I felt nothing more for him than the type of love one feels for their brother.

It didn't matter, anyway. My engagement to Luca was broken when my father realized he could profit from me. Apparently, I'd been seen by one of the Royals during one of Lina's performances in Istanbul. My father was offered an obscene amount of money in exchange for me. And of course, being the greedy swine that he is, my father happily decided to hand me over and to terminate his arrangement with Luca.

Even in modern times, betrothals were a common practice amongst gypsy tribes. But as I later found out, it wasn't marriage that the Royal wanted. In fact, it wasn't even the Royal who offered my father the money.

Instead, it was a woman. A woman who decided she recognized beauty in me that would make a lot of money within the members her social groups. I learned through my aunt that she was a madam. A very wealthy and renowned madam.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Royals tended to only marry each other, or at least within their own ranks. But I *had* been surprised. In fact, I had been completely shocked and hurt at the time. I was expected to become a modern day gypsy courtesan. It began to sink in that my father was willingly trying to turn me into a whore.

"You will have the dream life," my father advised me excitedly. He attempted to spin his plans for me into some kind of fantasy. "You'll travel amongst the Royals and rich jetsetters. You can attend college if you want. They'll even pay your tuition. Your every wish and desire will be yours to have. Staying with me and marrying Luca would never give you the same opportunities. This way, you will have the right to choose your own man. How many gypsy women can say the same, eh?"

I hated him in that moment. And at the same time, I fiercely loved him. Though he was clearly insane, the man truly believed he was doing me a favor.

I was supposed to leave for Romania on my eighteenth birthday. Only a few months away, my birthday had been looming over my head for a while now. It had been hard enough to accept a marriage between Luca and me. But life as a call girl? I shuddered, just thinking about it. I'd been dreading my birthday's arrival with each passing day.

So I ran away.

I should have been a good, little daughter and willingly obeyed my father's bidding. I would have spent the remainder of my life in the lap of luxury. If I had caught the attention of a Royal, I would have never had to want for anything. And truthfully, as much as I hated to admit it, the kind of life I would have had with the madam might have been preferable to the one I would have shared with Luca.

That's when I realized I needed to leave.

There was something in me, telling me I couldn't just sit back and let either fate happen. I didn't regret leaving. . .but I did regret how it had to be done.

Clutching my towel, I escaped the person in the mirror and headed downstairs. It was time to tell Miriam everything, whether I was prepared to or not.

THREE

As I was meandering down the stairwell, I was caught off guard when I heard the sound of several unknown voices looming nearby. I paused for a moment. I hadn't been expecting anyone to be in the house except for my grandmother. Quietly, I peeked into the kitchen.

There were two young girls helping my grandmother cook dinner. The girls were very pretty; one had coppery hair and the other was an iridescent blonde. Both of them were tall and slender, modelesque in stature. The girls were laughing with Miriam over some joke that had been told. The scene was warm and loving. I suddenly felt like an intruder.

I decided to retreat, but one of the stairs creaked loudly beneath my feet, giving me away. Much to my horror, everyone's heads turned in my direction. It was around that moment when I abruptly remembered I was covered with nothing more than a towel.

"Lola," Miriam addressed me casually. "How nice to see you are recovering."

A blush crept into my cheeks.

"Dakota, could you please find Lola something to wear?"

The girls resembled each other. My instincts told me they were sisters. They looked almost exactly alike, with the exception of their hair. Apart from the color, the copper-headed girl had thick, wavy hair, while the blonde's tresses were smooth and polished. I figured the copper-headed one must be "Dakota" because she looked up when Miriam called her name.

"Of course," she replied, and motioned me to follow her. As I did so, I found myself wondering who these sisters were. Upon closer inspection, I noticed Dakota appeared to be near my own age, the other girl maybe a few years older.

Dakota never glanced back at me as I silently followed her, but she seemed to sense my confusion. "We're cousins," she informed me.

"Oh. I had no idea," I commented awkwardly.

I began to piece together my family tree. I realized she must be my Uncle Eli's daughter. I heard he'd had children, but I'd never had the chance to meet them. In the gypsy world, family was almost always on the father's side. One was raised with their father's people and traveled with their father's people. Only daughters would venture outside of their tribes, and that was only for the sake of marriage. Although a marriage outside of one's own tribe was a rarity in itself. So I couldn't help but speculate how these sisters ended up here with Miriam and not with their father.

"In here." Dakota directed me to a bedroom at the end of the hall.

The bedroom was extremely messy. Well, maybe not messy, but very cramped. There was a queen-sized bed, which had been shoved up against the wall in the corner of the room, and there was a twin-sized mattress on the floor next to it. Clothes were strewn everywhere. The dresser was entirely covered in jewelry, accessories, hairpins, makeup and other female bits and pieces. Dakota dug through the bottom drawer of the dresser.

"Do you want pink or black?" The girl held up two different cotton tunics to choose from.

"Black," I answered mindlessly. I was still looking around as she handed me the top along with a pair of lounge pants. "Do you and your sister share this room?" I asked.

"Yes. Well, for the time being."

"I feel awful," I said. "Did I take your room? Because I can sleep on the couch--"

"No, you've got it all wrong. I don't live here." Dakota grinned at my assumption. "I'll only be here for the rest of the weekend. I'm a student at the University of South Florida. I live in a dorm during the school year."

"Oh, I see."

I was slightly disappointed. I thought Dakota was younger. It would have been nice having someone close to my age around.

"Take these, too. You can borrow them until you're able to get to a store."

She held out a huge pile of assorted clothing for me to take.

"No-- I couldn't."

"I insist." She shoved the clothes in my arms before I had a chance to protest. "I would hate to see you forced to wear anything of Miriam's. I swear the woman has no shame. Besides," she motioned her arms outwards in gesture to the entirety of the room. "As you can probably see, I have plenty of clothes."

I slowly smiled. "Thanks."

"No problem." She beamed back at me. She seemed to be genuinely kind. And up close, I noticed her face was just as pretty as her shiny, coppery hair. She had sparkling green eyes and a smile that seemed like it was permanently etched across her face.

Dakota laid her palm down across my hand, which I'd been using to clutch the stack of clothes with. I eyed her curiously. She tensed her brow as if she were thinking very hard about something.

"You were with a traveling show. How exciting. Miriam didn't tell me you were a performer."

I stepped back, snatching my hand away. So she could see things about people. . .I didn't want her to see anything else.

"I wasn't," I mentioned quietly. "Well, I know how to dance, but my father never let me perform."

"A shame," Dakota said. "You have the talent for it." I shrugged uncomfortably.

"I'll let you get changed." Dakota excused herself politely, and quickly left the room.

I stood there for a moment, wondering what else Dakota had seen about me. I hoped it hadn't been much. If she saw things with her touch, then she couldn't have seen much. She'd only held my hand for a moment. The thought relieved me a little.

Once I was presentable, I headed back towards the kitchen where we ended up eating dinner. Miriam didn't like to use the dining room. Instead she preferred to use her massively large island, which she surrounded with wooden barstools. It was less formal, and I supposed more comfortable.

I was introduced to the elder sister, Annika, who was a slightly older version of Dakota. I could tell that although the sisters resembled each other significantly in appearance, they seemed to differ vastly in personality. Just as Dakota had been outgoing and friendly, Annika was quiet and reserved. Yet they seemed equally kind.

Annika fawned over Miriam, coddling her as if she were a caretaker instead of her granddaughter. I discovered over the dinner conversation that Annika lived her with Miriam permanently and worked as a detective in the city.

My grandmother seemed happy to have the company, which made me wonder if she'd been very lonely after my grandfather died. I suppose it was something I'd never considered before. I found myself regretfully wishing I'd been able to visit much more often than I had in the past. It would have been good for Miriam, especially after being left alone.

At least I'm here now, I thought to myself. At least I finally found the strength to come. I reassured myself that for right now, I was where I was supposed to be.

I didn't realize how famished I was until I started eating. The meal was simple, plain, but absolutely delectable. They roasted a chicken with garlic and onions, pairing it with mixed vegetables and mashed potatoes with gravy. I ate my food quickly. It was almost as if I hadn't eaten in weeks. Actually, now that I thought about it, I remembered I hadn't eaten since yesterday morning.

While I ate, I listened quietly as the girls conversed with Miriam over the meal. Their voices held my rapt attention as they spoke; Dakota's was giggly and fast, while Annika's was softer and more pronounced.

"Strange weather last night, eh, Kota?" Annika asked her sister.

I watched as Dakota rolled her eyes. "It was only a lucky guess," she replied. "That storm had been developing in the gulf for nearly two weeks."

"But the forecasters didn't predict it would hit Clearwater. I called it fair and square."

"Course they did." Dakota swallowed her mouthful of potatoes.

"As soon as it switched tracks."

"Oh, give over, Kota," Annika said. "I named the time and date it would hit. Pay up."

Dakota looked towards Miriam incredulously. "Are you going to let her rob me blind, Grams? And here I am, a starving artist, still in college, no less."

Miriam held her hands up in mock protest. "I'm out of this one," she said to them both.

Dakota reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. She slid it across the table to Annika. "Next time I'll know you're trying to dupe me when you want to make a bet. Should have realized not to trust you and your strong *feelings*."

"Why's that?" Annika began to chuckle.

"Because what it really means is that you had one of your freak show premonitions."

"Dreams," Annika corrected. "It was a dream. And stop being such a sore loser."

Dakota snorted. "I'm only a sore loser because you made it sound like you were guessing."

"Only fools make bets they're not sure of."

Dakota arched a brow. "So I'm a fool then?"

Annika shrugged. "I never named you, specifically. But if the shoe fits. . ."

"Now girls," Miriam chimed in. "Let's not forget we have company. We wouldn't want to frighten Lola off so soon, would we?"

I didn't like that the attention turned back towards me. I was enjoying listening to the sisters' banter. Although they threw sarcastic barbs back and forth at each other, I could tell it was lighthearted. Still, I couldn't help but notice the topic of conversation wasn't very typical. I doubted many siblings placed wagers on the next natural disaster to strike.

"The food was delicious," I commented to no one in particular. It was the first thing I'd said since we started eating dinner.

"We're happy you liked it," Annika said.

"You're lucky it's mashed potato night," Dakota added.

"Miriam only serves potatoes about once a month."

Miriam set her fork down. "Oh, what a whopper."

"It's true!" Dakota exclaimed. "Grams, when was the last time you cooked any starches for dinner?"

Miriam contemplated while counting on her fingers. Her face lit up as she remembered. "Why, just last Tuesday I made rice." Annika shook her head as she raised her glass of water to her lips. "Nope, doesn't count. That was brown rice."

"Why doesn't that count?"

Dakota took a moment to explain to me in an aside, "She's on a health kick."

"They're just mad because I don't stock up on ice cream and potato chips," Miriam countered.

The playful arguing continued for a while longer. The dynamic between the three women seemed very foreign to me, nothing like I'd ever experienced with my father. I wondered if this was what a normal home was like.

Unfortunately, it ended too soon. Or maybe it just felt that way because I was dreading the approaching conversation I'd promised Miriam. After everyone was finished eating, Miriam shooed Dakota and Annika out of the room so we could talk privately.

"Lola can help me with that," she'd said to Annika, who had begun to wash the dishes. She motioned her towards the door. "Now off you go."

I became uneasy when I realized what was coming. My legs felt as heavy as bricks as I slowly collected the glasses and plates off of the table and brought them to the sink for Miriam to wash.

Afterwards, I grabbed a towel to dry the wet dishes while she washed. I remained silent.

"Why don't you start with the whys?" she suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, why did you want to leave, Lo?"

I glanced downwards. Here it comes. There was no use prolonging it. "Because of Christo. I just couldn't do what he wanted anymore."

"And what did he want you to do?"

I frowned. "You're not going to like it."

"Probably not," she agreed. "You're much too smart to run away from your father for dumb reasons."

I sighed, knowing she would fly through the roof after hearing this. I braced myself. "He tried to sell me to Madam Wilda."

My grandmother paused in the middle of washing a plate.

She flung the plate across the room, letting it shatter into a thousand pieces across the tiles.

I winced at the clinking sounds. In a low voice, I mumbled, "Told you that you wouldn't like it."

"I swear," Miriam said, pausing to take a deep breath. "Your father has always been two bricks short of a load."

I raised an eyebrow. "Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"He's one fry short of a happy meal-- that's what I mean."

Puzzled, I simply nodded, pretending to understand her.

"Where is that good-for-nothing?" she continued to bellow. "I think I'll take my shot gun and have a little talk with him."

I cast my eyes downward. "It's no use," I said dejectedly. "He's in prison."

She marveled at me. "Are you serious?"

It made me feel ten times worse that even Miriam- a *gaji*-understood the underlying meaning behind what I'd just told her. She knew how much it would kill his spirit to be locked away.

"It's all my fault," I choked. A knot formed at the back of my throat. Watching Miriam digest the news brought out all the shame I felt.

"Why is this your fault?"

"Lina and I devised a plan so I could leave," I explained. "We were working a job. We were lifting a truckload of Mercedes that were headed down from Nashville. I escaped in one of the cars."

She stiffened and stood up straighter, as if she were deflecting my words. Normally, my father and I left out the unsavory parts of our lives when we spoke to Miriam. She knew, anyway, but it became a habit to not tell her certain things (like how our income was made). Christo and I knew she didn't approve.

"And you came straight here?" she eventually asked.

I nodded. "Until the storm hit."

"So how do you know your father is in jail?"

"Zetta saw it coming," I answered. "That's the really crappy part about all of this. I knew what would happen, but I let it happen anyway."

I watched her face as everything fully sunk in. She frowned at me. "Lola, you can't blame yourself for your father's mistakes."

"What? Of course I can." I took a deep breath and then let the air out slowly. "I know I have to accept it. But ultimately, I let this

happen, Grams. He followed me because I left, and for that reason alone, he got caught. This is *my* doing."

She shook her head as if refusing to believe me. "Good grief. You better believe this is all your father's doings, little girl. And it's his doings because he is an eternal blockhead. Are you even listening to yourself, Lo? He tried to sell his own daughter into prostitution!"

"He doesn't think of it that way," I pointed out.

"Regardless," Miriam said, waving her hand in the air. "I don't care how fancy Madam Wilda tries to make her business out to be.

She's in the business of prostitution, no matter what angle you spin on it."

I shifted uncomfortably. I hated talking about Madam Wilda and my almost-future with her. "No matter how justified you think I am, Christo will never agree. The whole troupe, with the exception of Lina and Zetta, will hate me for this. Even after he gets out."

"They'll get over it. But-- did you just say he's going to get out?"

"Yes, but Zetta said it would take a while. I guess Dad's lackeys will find a way to break him out."

"And you're still torn up about it?" She made a *wooshing* noise and slapped her thigh. "Sounds to me like justice was served, after all. Soon enough your papa will be out free and clear. Zetta's visions are never wrong. And in the meantime, he can sit in his cell and think about what an imbecile he is. Might even do him some good."

"Grams, the future isn't always clear. Just because Zetta saw him getting out of prison doesn't mean it will happen. Things can change, you know."

"So then how do you know he was ever locked up in the first place?"

I shrugged. "I just know. About fifteen minutes after I had ran away he called my cell phone. . .but I didn't pick up. Me, plus the car I was driving, equaled a whole lot of money that would be out of Christo's pockets."

My grandmother considered this. "So do you think they'll come after you?"

I knew right away she was referring to my father's men. I shrugged. In all honesty, I didn't know the answer to her question. "The way I see it," I began theorizing. "They're either angry enough to come after me. . .or they resent me enough that they won't bother. I think and I hope it's the latter, even though that probably means that they'll never forgive me for what I've done."

She nodded. There was a slight flicker of worry in her eyes, which I hated seeing. It made me question my decision to come here. I forced the thought aside. Miriam's house would be safe. No one would try to come for me here. I had to believe that.

"What about after they break him out?" she asked.

I swallowed, "I don't know."

She nodded once more, lost in thought. "Grams, don't worry," I assured her. "I would never come here if I thought I would be putting you in harm's way. Christo has a deep respect for you.

Miriam only chuckled. "Little girl, I am certainly not worried for myself. It's you who I'm concerned for."

"Why?"

She sighed. "Because I don't think your father will *ever* let you go."

FOUR

Dakota and I lounged around in my new bedroom; me on the window seat and her on the thickly padded rug next to the bed. Since she was leaving tomorrow to go back to school, she'd invited herself into my room earlier this evening for a slumber party of sorts. I suspected she was attempting to do the whole female bonding thing, which was perfectly fine with me. I was happy to be hanging out with my newly found cousin. Or anyone, for that matter.

Mostly, Dakota regaled me with her college stories. After she finished telling me about her present life, she moved on to recounting her past lives, which always entranced me, no matter who was doing the storytelling.

"My favorite life was my only non-gypsy life. It was...beautiful, really."

I was instantly curious. There weren't many gypsies who had the chance to experience a life outside of the gypsy tribes. It was considered a novelty. Those lives were as rare as one of the gaje having a gypsy life, which I've never witnessed, though I knew it was possible.

My mother had been a gaji, but she'd married into the gypsy folds. Sometimes, I suspected I inherited her genes. Maybe I was just an ordinary gaji. Maybe I was one of the few exceptions within our world. Maybe I was a rarity. It would definitely explain why I couldn't remember my past lives. The gaje never remembered. Their

memories were wiped clean with each birth. And inexplicably, only gypsies ever remembered.

"What was it like?" I eventually asked Dakota, wondrous.

She grinned, moving closer to me on the rug. "Well, I grew up in New England, in the late eighteen hundreds. I married a man who was in the shipping business. His name was David." Dakota's eyes grew hazy as she remembered this 'David'.

"I suppose it was my natural instinct to marry a man who owned ships. And he was a good man. He indulged me by letting me travel with him. I. . .I loved him."

I smiled. From what I understood, love was not always found in a lifetime. Not true love, anyway.

"We bore two children," Dakota continued. "Two boys.

Together, we had so many adventures on the high seas. Once, we even escaped a band of pirates!" Dakota chuckled now and then she sighed. "It was so dangerous. . .but so much fun. I loved my little family."

Her green eyes seemed to clear and her attention was brought back to the present. She looked up at me now. "So what was your favorite lifetime?"

There it was, the question I hated, though I'd heard it many times before. I used to tell the members of my father's troupe such outrageous lies about my past lives, just for the sole purpose of fitting in. The only person who'd ever caught me was Auntie Zetta. Then again, she could see inside people's heads in a way that other gypsies couldn't. While I told countless stories about the people I'd been in

my past lives, she had probably looked inside my head to find there was nothing actually there.

I was seven years old the first time she'd caught me. I'd been in the middle of telling the other children one of my riveting stories when she overheard. She'd taken me by surprise by yanking me by my arm and pulling me into one of the nearby RVs.

"Lola, why do you tell such lies?" She held a bar of soap in her hands, which my worried eyes remained locked upon.

"I'm not making up any lies, Auntie, I swear!"

She crossed her hands over her chest, eyeing me dubiously.

"Do you even know where Cleopatra is from?" she asked.

"Course I do," I tilted my head back, trying to appear very regal. "Back then I was a like a queen, but they called me a 'pharaoh'. And I lived in Egypt, next to the pyramids."

"Uh-huh." My aunt continued to eye me and I grew nervous.
"And did you have any lovers in that lifetime?"

"Y-es."

"And who were they, eh? What were their names?"

I grinned cockily before replying. "Caesar and Mark Antony."

I knew she wasn't expecting my effortless answer.

But then she pulled another one on me.

"And how many children did you bear?"

I twitched, nervous again. "Um, two."

"Really? And what were their names?"

The tears formed quickly now. "Please don't use the soap!" I cried. "I don't have memories like the other children. Please don't use the soap, Auntie!"

I buried my wet face in her bosom as I clung tightly to her. My aunt set the bar of soap down on the counter, then kneeled down to my eye level.

"Why do you lie, Lola? You know it's wrong."

I sniffled a little, still afraid she might retrieve the soap. "I don't know," I told her honestly. "I just wanted to be someone, too."

She clicked her tongue. "You couldn't choose someone without such a high profile?"

I shrugged. "I like Cleopatra. I could have been her in a past life, you never know."

"Well maybe if you're a good little girl in this life, and you stop telling so many lies, you may get your memories back in the next one, eh?"

Sadly, I nodded. "I'll be good," I promised.

Ironically, I didn't keep that promise. I only gave up lying for stealing, which was probably worse in any case. If my aunt's words rang true, I probably wouldn't be getting my memories back anytime soon.

"So are you ever going to tell me?"

I was brought back to the present. I observed Dakota waiting patiently for me to tell her about my favorite past life. I provided her with my usual answer.

"There was nothing very special. I really don't like talking about my past lives."

She nodded, accepting my answer. "I understand." And then she quickly moved on from that subject to another gypsy pastime: tarot cards. As I noticed her pulling out a deck from a dresser drawer, I grinned. "You can't be serious."

"Come on, you have to let me practice on you! If my career in fashion doesn't work out, I'll need something else to fall back on."

I chuckled. "Okay, fine, *Madam* Dakota," I agreed. "But no touching. That's cheating. And if you get the death card, you had better lie to me. Tell me it means love or money."

"Deal." She laughed. "Now split the deck into three piles. . ."

~ ~

The next morning, everyone said goodbye to Dakota over breakfast. Then, we all helped her pack her car before seeing her off. It was a little disheartening. My friend count just went from one to zero. Apparently Clearwater wasn't growing on me.

Almost immediately after she drove away, Miriam instructed me to get dressed, announcing we had plans today. I was extremely curious, but I didn't question her.

After showering, I threw on some of Dakota's clothes, then waited for Miriam outside by her Lincoln Town Car. I eyed the car,

thinking it was the epitome of an old person's car. It didn't help that it was the exact shade of burgundy only elderly people choose.

Miriam took longer than me to get ready, but I knew it was because she never went anywhere without wearing a skirt and heels. Sure enough, fifteen minutes later, Miriam came strolling out of the house in a navy skirt with a cotton white blouse, paired with matching pumps. She often dressed the way she felt. I'm pretty sure navy means she felt determined today.

She started up the car, and then informed me that we were headed for the nearest private school- in order to enroll me for the fall semester. I stared at Miriam as if she'd lost her mind.

"Don't give me that look," she told me. "Who knows how long you'll be here for? And if you're going to live with me, you're going to attend school. That's my only rule. And it's certainly not a difficult one to follow."

"Okay, I don't have a problem with that," I allowed. "But I don't understand why it has to be a private school. Who knows what could happen? I just don't want you to waste your money on something I may not be here to use."

I hated to talk about leaving, but I had to look at my situation logically. Whenever my father did finally get out of jail, he might be angry enough to come after me. I wish I didn't have to consider that possibility, but it was better to be prepared for anything.

And who knew if I could even bear staying here? I'd never stayed in any one place for very long, but then again, I've never been given the opportunity to try. Annika and Dakota certainly managed it

well enough. They lived like normal people. I wondered if I was capable of doing the same.

My grandmother merely snorted in response to my earlier comments. Under her breath, she muttered, "A good education is *not* a waste of money."

She eventually glanced over at me to meet my faraway gaze. She tapped on the wheel and fidgeted as she drove.

"Are you okay?" I asked, noting her odd behavior.

After a few moments, she sighed wearily. "Christo called last night from a county jail in Tennessee."

My lips parted as her news sunk in. "And you're just now telling me!" I complained. "What happened? What did he say?"

"Nothing," she assured me. "Don't get so worked up. He just wanted to know where you were. I told him you were staying with me. He had assumed as much, anyway. And then he said 'okay' and hung up before I had a chance to say anything else."

Confused, I asked, "That's *all* he said? Just 'okay' and then 'bye?""

"That's all he said."

"That is so weird of him."

She nodded in agreement. "I thought so, too. But you know what, Lo? As much of an imbecile as your father is, I wonder if he was only calling to make sure you got here and to know you're safe."

I shook my head, refusing to believe that. "You don't know him like I do. He has an ulterior motive for everything he does. I'm sure

he only wanted to confirm my whereabouts. Whether or not he decides to do anything is his decision."

"I suppose we'll cross that bridge when we get to it," she said.

"But in the meantime, you're attending Frightwell and Black's

Academy for the Superior Student."

I raised an inquisitive brow. "Frightwell and what? That's kind of long winded for a high school name."

My doubts about the school only increased when we arrived and started the enrollment process. The building was small. I found out only a handful of students attended; there were approximately one hundred students in the entire junior class. But my worst fear was realized when the dean handed my grandmother the tuition bill. I nearly choked, I was so appalled.

"Are you kidding me?" I shouted, causing the dean to flinch. "Grams, this is ridiculous. You can buy a brand new car for this amount of money!"

After my outburst, the dean politely excused himself. "I'll let you two talk it over," he said, quickly heading for the door.

Miriam frowned, and stiffly crossed her arms. "It's my money, little girl. Stop embarrassing me and let me pay the man."

"But-- did you see the bill?"

"I know how much it costs. Both Annika and Dakota attended this school, which, by the way, is in the nation's top ten percent for high performance. That's saying a lot for this state."

"This is ridiculous, Grams. I would be just as happy attending a public school. Which costs nothing."

Miriam groaned. I could sense she was becoming a little aggravated with me at this point. "I know you don't understand, Lola. But this is for my happiness, okay? To me, it doesn't seem like a waste of money because I know a good education pays off in the long run. So will you just let me sign the check?"

Grinding my teeth, I debated whether or not I should save my arguments. For some reason, this whole school thing was extremely important to Miriam. I could tell she wouldn't let it go easily. And I doubted I could talk her out of it. I could, however, simply provide her with a point blank "no." But I'm pretty sure that would just piss her off.

"Fine," I sighed, caving.

She grinned and called for the dean.

He walked into the office moments later. As soon as he saw the smile lighting up my grandmother's face and the frown I adamantly wore, he perked right up.

The dean handed us a stack of papers to fill out, and then asked me for proof of identification and transcripts in order to add copies to my student record. Before my grandmother could voice any of the concerns that were clearly written across her features, I pulled a forged social security card and birth certificate from my bag and placed it on the desk. I then added a fake transcript to the stack. "Here you are," I told him, attempting to smile. The illegal documents were some of the few items I had remembered to grab before I ran away. Miriam raised a skeptical brow, but decided not to say anything.

Later, when we were back in the car, she got it all out. "And just where did you get all those papers from, little girl?"

"Christo knows a man."

"You do realize that's a felony, don't you?"

I shrugged. "I'm a minor. Besides, if I had to get the real papers, I wouldn't be able to enroll by the fall semester. Applying for residency can take weeks. And citizenship takes even longer."

She considered this. "Well then, I suppose the papers you've got will do for now."

I hid my smile, thinking it was ironic that she had a huge problem with me not going to school, but it was completely okay that I lied in order to get in.

As we drove back home, I decided to ask Miriam about volunteer opportunities in the neighborhood. I'd been thinking about it and I figured that with the amount of crimes I've committed, I should probably find a way to repay for them. It would keep me busy, anyway. Being busy meant no time to think about Christo, something I desperately needed.

"I think there is a Habitat for Humanity office that's not far from here."

Miriam was quiet for a few moments. Then, out of the blue, she mentioned, "You know, Lo, you're not a bad person."

She patted my hand gingerly. It was a nice gesture, but it made me feel uncomfortable. She didn't know half of the things I'd done.

And I definitely wasn't about to enlighten her with my sordid history.

I may have become a thief because of my father, but mostly, I'd

chosen to steal for my own selfish reasons. I was no better than he was. The only difference between us was that I was now beginning to feel repentant.

"Nonetheless, I think it's a good idea," Miriam added a few moments later. "The volunteer thing. If it relieves some of the guilt you're carrying, I am all for it."

Me too, I thought. Let's hope it helps. Because I don't want to feel this awful anymore.

FIVE

The beach was surprisingly beautiful in its entirety. For the most, part it laid flat against the shore; the water was a dazzling color of turquoise, which darkened to a midnight blue as it deepened.

Nearing the water, I could see a school of stingrays swimming against a small wave. Miriam told me this was the season for them. They kept to the shore mostly. She told me I needn't worry if I decided to swim. Apparently, sting rays rarely bothered humans. Although she did mention to make sure I shuffled my feet whenever I stepped into the water. She called it "the sting ray shuffle." I'm pretty sure she named it that herself.

The serene atmosphere of the beach made my work bearable, enjoyable even, which was surprising. There was something internally satisfying about a day of physical labor. Maybe it was because I knew I would feel so relieved when I finished.

I was, however, a little disturbed to find out how much trash people left scattered along the shore. I watched (extremely annoyed) as a family of five picnicked on the beach and then left behind their wrappers and containers- a blatant disrespect for the marine life. Either that or they saw me coming and figured I was their own personal "clean-up crew."

The volunteers were made to watch a preliminary slide-show before being assigned work. During the presentation, they talked about how thousands of marine animals die each year either because they eat trash, mistaking it for food, or because they become inescapably entangled in it and suffocated to death. I also remember hearing that marine habitats are continually being destroyed because of trash and bacterial contamination from sewage. I wanted to march over to the garbage-leaving family and shout these facts at them.

Even sadder was when the video displayed the effects of the oil spill. The slide showed a pitiful image of a deceased dolphin, decomposing on the rocks at Queen Bess Island, not too far from here. The dolphin was filled with oil. It was the saddest part of the film. I actually had to turn my head away from the television. I noticed a few of the other volunteers had also become a little emotional. Some were even teary-eyed. Those images continued to preoccupy my thoughts throughout the day.

Upon realizing that only a few pictures of dying animals could affect me, haunting my every thought, I heard the insecure voice inside my head say, *Great, you're becoming some sort of tree-hugging do-gooder*. Christo would disown you for sure.

I tried to think of some way I was benefiting myself for his sake. I smiled as I thought of how my pale skin would gain a healthy tan while I worked in the warmth of the sun every day. It would actually be a great benefit to me to have a little color in my cheeks. Miriam even remarked on how washed-out I've been looking lately.

There, Chris. Now you can see I'm not completely selfless. There's something in it for me.

Ugh, I should never have thought of Christo. Thinking of him always managed to bring a wave of guilt crashing down over me. To

make things worse, there were a few clusters of people enjoying the beach in my nearby proximity. There was no way I was going to let someone see me get all weepy. I'd had my fill of unexpected emerges of heart-breaking emotions for today.

I tried to block thoughts of Christo out of my mind. With all my might, I attempted to simply focus on my work. Somehow the physical pains of labor eased the awful discomfort I felt every time I thought of my father. Even if only a little.

As I concentrated on cleaning up the debris around me, I noticed the most peculiar thing. There was a line of soda cans spread along the sand, about five feet before the water met the shore. They were in a perfect little line, like a row of ducks.

Shaking my head, I began to pick each one up from the sand, curious to know what lunatic had decided to artfully leave their trash behind. I followed the trail of trash, wondering where it would lead to. It became tiring, the bending down, grabbing a can, bending down again, grabbing another can. I looked out into the distance. The trail seemed to stretch on for miles. It wasn't long before the whole process became an extremely aggravating chore.

After what seemed to be an hour, though was more than likely only twenty or so minutes passing by, I finally was led to the pier near Miriam's house.

The trail of soda cans simply came to an end.

I spun around, looking for the culprit. No one was in sight. It was the weirdest, most useless endeavor I'd ever ensued in my life.

Surely there must have been some reason the cans were spread out in

a trail? Like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, except maybe a pot of aluminum instead? But no, there was nothing there. No explanation for the culprit's insanity.

I searched the horizon. My vision wasn't crystal-clear without my glasses and I hadn't thought to bring them with me. But as far as I could see. . .just more nothingness. Nothing but a huge array of expensive yachts floating alongside the pier like water-bred mansions.

The sound of a distant hammering came from one the yachts. I listened closely, trying to scout out the sound. Eventually, I noticed a boat that stuck out like a sore thumb from the rest. A "fixer upper" would be the appropriate term for the pathetic looking pile of faded wood.

I thought I saw someone onboard, but I wasn't sure. I moved closer so I could see more clearly. I was bizarrely drawn to the crappy boat. Dimly, I noticed the name *Sea Lily* etched into its side panel.

Pretty name, I mused

There was a man on board, a younger man. He looked like he was maybe a few years older than me. He held a hammer in his hands. From the way he was bent over, it looked like he was laying some flooring down on the interior. He turned slightly and his features came more clearly into view.

I think my heart stopped.

He had to be the most beautiful guy I'd ever seen. . .and for some inexplicable reason, he was the most intriguing guy I'd ever encountered. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I simply stared at him, gawking like a fool.

It didn't make sense, my captivation of him. It was almost like I'd never seen a handsome guy before. My family had its fair share of beautiful people. I would like to think I wasn't the least bit vain; however, I did recognize the fact that my family seemed to breed with exceedingly good genes. My father and most of my cousins encompassed an almost unreal celebrity type of gorgeousness about them.

But the guy I was staring at had something else about him entirely. It was almost an ethereal beauty, a presence that just captured my complete attention. I was hard pressed to say that maybe I was a little envious of him. That thought forced me to realize I was a just a *tiny* bit vain. . .

There was nothing so vastly different about him compared to all the men I'd ever encountered. He was slightly taller than average, I'd say about six-foot-two or so. He had dark brown hair and a bronzed complexion, probably due from the endless Florida sunshine. I couldn't tell what color his eyes were from where I was standing, though if I had to guess, I'd say they were a darker hue.

Curiously, there was nothing incredibly remarkable about him. Well, aside from the obvious perfection of his acquired muscle mass. He reminded me of the Grecian sculptures I visited while I was in Athens last summer. In truth, the man was perfect in every way possible. . .but I couldn't even begin to fathom why he outshone every other handsome man I'd ever come across. There was just *something* about him.

I had to move closer, so I could make sure my eyes were not deceiving me. My feet walked along the pier of their own accord, my eyes staying locked upon the young man. As I grew nearer, I realized he could sense my presence. I thought I saw him look up at me, but he quickly looked away. Weird. . .

When I reached his boat, he didn't stop working. I was clearly in his line of vision, but he continued to hammer at the flooring directly beneath him.

"Um, excuse me?" I called to him loudly, wondering what on earth I was going to say.

He eventually stopped hammering, straightening his body to his full height. He was altogether too breathtaking this close up.

He wore no shoes, some khaki shorts and a faded U.S. Navy t-shirt. I found myself wondering if he'd actually been in the Navy. He looked like the type, I supposed.

The man finally tossed the hammer down on the table beside him, squinting up at me through the sunlight. Gray, I noticed his eyes were a dark shade of gray.

His delayed reaction to my presence caused me to believe I was some kind of unwanted interruption. And now that I had his attention, my mind lost its course of action. I wanted to kick myself.

"Yes?" The deep baritone of his voice sent chills down my spine. I couldn't comprehend why he was affecting me to this extent.

Say something, my mind screamed. I looked away, back towards the golf cart, and noticed my trash bag. I finally remembered

why I walked over to this part of the beach in the first place. Ask him about the cans!

"Um, I was wondering if I could ask you a question, if you have a moment?"

He merely nodded, imploring me to continue speaking. I still sensed I was interrupting him in some huge way.

My nervousness caused me to speak a little quickly. "Well, you see, I volunteer for Habitat for Humanity and I was helping to clean up this area of the beach today. Anyway, I came across this line of soda cans. It was the weirdest thing. There were a bazillion of them and they eventually led me to this pier. . ." I took a breath to calm my anxiety and waited for his confusion to take root. Thankfully, he just waited for me to finish speaking. "Well, I was wondering if, since you've been out here working on your boat and all, if you happened to catch sight of the person who is leaving all these cans behind?"

His face was without expression. He was proving to be exactly like the Grecian sculptures- carved out of stone.

Finally, he said, "Sorry. Didn't see anyone."

I waited for him to say more, feeling like an idiot. No other words escaped his perfect lips.

"Oh. . . really? Nobody at all?"

It bothered me more than a little that he didn't seem as freaked out about these cans as I was. He could have at least provided me with some small portrayal of the bewilderment that I had felt at following a mile long trail of soda cans.

"Nope, no one."

His abruptness did not put me at ease. He even picked his hammer back up.

"Oh. Okay, well, thanks anyway."

"No problem," he replied, then turned his back to me.

While walking away, I became incredulous. I knew I shouldn't be surprised by his rudeness. The man was truly gorgeous. It was no wonder he acted like he did. Perhaps it bothered me so much because I was used to guys trying to pursue me, being extra sweet to please me and going out of their way to help me. Luca used to tell me in a very annoyed voice, "They fall all over themselves trying to win your favor."

I scratched my head in contemplation, wondering what went wrong. . .I guess I was a little sweaty today. Not to mention the guy on the boat had to be at least five or six years older than me. But still. . .it bothered me. In quick, heated strides, I snatched up my bag of cans and walked back in the direction of the golf cart. At least Christo taught me to be more humble, I thought to myself resentfully.

After I thought about it and my temper had cooled somewhat, I became annoyed with myself for relating my confrontation with the beautiful man to my own looks and appeal. I needed to realize that I simply came into contact with someone who was just plain rude. There was nothing else to it. And if I didn't stop over analyzing everything, I was bound to pick up some bad traits of my own.

I smiled, feeling better. I would just forget the rude guy and finish what was left to clean up along the beach. There was no reason I should let something so insignificant affect me to this extent. I had

more important tasks at hand. Like cleaning up the rest of this beach. .

By the time my work was done, I was exhausted. But it was a good kind of exhaustion. The kind where one feels accomplished.

It wasn't until I had made it back to the house, showered and sat down to eat lunch before I figured out who the man on the boat was. I nearly choked on my turkey sandwich, remembering the arms that had been wrapped around me during the night of the storm were the same arms of the man on the boat today. It had almost slipped my mind, seeing the remnants of a tattoo sticking out from beneath the sleeve of his t-shirt. Some sort of tribal design. He was the angel!

Well, I suppose I could let the angel theory go now that I could see he was perfectly alive and human. There was just something about him. Something I wished I could put my finger on. . .

Nonchalantly, I strolled into the living room where Miriam was lying on the couch watching her soap opera. She had applied a cream mask applied to her face, the exact color of seaweed.

"You look like an alien," I remarked.

She arched a brow. "Lo, you really need work on your bluntness."

I smiled. I started to ask her about the angel/boat guy, but she put her finger up as if to tell me to hold on. Apparently, her soap opera was at some dramatic climax she didn't want me to interrupt. She was sitting on the edge of her seat in anticipation. I drummed my fingers along the arm of the couch, waiting for the commercials. I couldn't help but feel irritated. I hated soap operas.

Finally, the commercials started and Miriam once again remembered I was alive and in the same room with her.

"Grams, I need to ask you a question about your neighbors who rescued me the night I came to Florida."

"What is it?" I couldn't be sure, but it looked like she stiffened, as if she were uncomfortable with me asking about her neighbors.

I decided to be direct with her. "Does one of them own a boat down by the pier?"

"Yes, I believe so. Gabe just bought an older speedboat he was planning to fix up, but I don't think he's got it running yet. Why?"

Gabe, like Gabriel. I almost laughed at the irony.

"I recognized him today when I was doing my volunteer work. He was there doing some handiwork on it. Hey, do you know--"

"Do you think that really works?" she asked, changing the subject and throwing me off. She pointed to the television at a commercial for some medical solution that supposedly makes your eyelashes grow.

"I don't know, Grams. Hey, he's kind of strange, isn't he?"

"Who?" she asked, caught up in the commercial. Or, at least she appeared caught up in the commercial. For some insane reason, I felt like she was purposely dodging my questions. Super annoying of her.

"Gabe, your neighbor, who helped rescue me."

"He's sort of quiet, I suppose. Why?"

I shook my head, remembering the scene on the beach. "He just struck me as odd. Not the very friendly type, you know?"

"You spoke to him?"

"Yeah, it's a long story. There were all these soda cans and I was only asking him if he knew--"

"That's nice dear. Tell me about it later?"

I couldn't believe her. Miriam had completely cut me off.

Twice! One glance back at the television and I could see why. Her soap was back on. This conversation simply wasn't working. Giving up, I decided to go finish my lunch.

"Sure," I mumbled.

Just as I was about to leave the room, Miriam spoke up again.

"You know," she said, pausing to listen to one of the characters speak for a moment, and then beginning again. "Gabe is Annika's fiancé. They're planning to announce their engagement at the family's annual Fall Festival."

Miriam paused to look at me from the corner of her eyes, like she was waiting for my reaction. "You'll have to come, of course, and meet the whole family. They're good people, every single one of the Constantins. Annika is as happy as I've ever seen her. Anni and Gabe, they make a lovely couple."

"Oh, I didn't realize. . .that's nice." My voice went limp.

I turned to leave, heading in the direction of the kitchen, but the strangest thing happened after she finished speaking. It was like the pit of my stomach dropped out from under me. I didn't understand what was happening or why I felt like I did, so I quickly left the living room to get out from Miriam's sight.

I didn't go back to the kitchen to finish my lunch. I ran straight up the stairs to my bedroom, as fast as I could. As soon as I closed the door and latched it shut, I fell to my knees, sliding down the wall.

It felt like I couldn't breathe. It felt like my heart was beating so hard that it might explode from the inside of my chest.

My God, I'm having a panic attack, I thought to myself.

I couldn't place it, couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. Why was I reacting this way? What had Miriam said that was so wrong?

I closed my eyes to focus on my breathing. In the past, these sorts of reactions had been triggered out of the blue. Something in me just snapped. Auntie Zetta told me it was probably due to my incapability to remember my past lives. She told me certain words, phrases or occurrences could bring something out in me that I felt on a more basic instinct. She had also provided me with steps to calm myself and to focus, in case I might stumble upon an old memory.

Carefully, I lied down across the woven rug in my bedroom, spreading my arms and legs out like DaVinci's Vitruvian Man.

Zetta's soothing voice filled my mind, repeating the steps for me.

Step One: Close your eyes.

This step mainly allowed me to tune out any distractions.

Step Two: Focus on breathing and clear your mind.

I breathed in. I breathed out. I allowed my mind to think of nothing except my breathing, until it slowed to a normal pace. Zetta called this step meditation. She said you couldn't begin to focus until your mind was a clean palette.

Step Three: Allow yourself to acknowledge what you're feeling.

I tried to allow myself to feel, without it taking over me again.

What emotions had enveloped me earlier? I think they came from a source of pain, but I couldn't be sure.

I shouldn't be trying to think. Zetta told me not to think during this part of the process. She told me I needed to *feel* what was bothering me first. I had to feel it, in order to figure out my thought process.

So I attempted to feel whatever the emotion was once again...and then I figured it out. It was *betrayal*. I felt *betrayed* to my very core.

As thoroughly confusing as that new information was, I didn't let myself ponder on the reason for the betrayal.

Step Four: Let your thoughts develop from within.

This part was the trickiest. I always seemed to give up before I could hear myself think anything. But I was focused, and I had to see this out. I focused on the betrayal, allowing myself to feel it on every level of my being.

It was a long time before I was able to hear the words come to me. In fact, by the time I heard anything, tears had formed in my eyes due to this horrible sense that I had been wronged. When I finally did hear myself think the thoughts, I wasn't positive I had heard myself correctly because it was just the barest of a whisper.

Mine, I thought, Gabe is mine.

Most of the night I spent curled up in bed, trying not to think about anything. If my own thoughts didn't make sense anymore, I figured I should probably think about nothing for a while. It didn't really work.

The house was extremely hot tonight. The knob on the fan was turned all the way up to full blast, but it wasn't helping very much. I pinched the thin fabric of my silky tank top away from me, but my skin was sticky with sweat and the material simply clung back to my body as soon as I let go of it.

I emerged from my bed to open the window, hoping there might be a cool breeze somewhere in the balmy air tonight. As I did, I noticed Annika's black Mazda pulling into the driveway. She slammed her car door shut and ran inside the house. She raised her sleeve to her eyes. It appeared as if she were wiping away tears.

I knew I should probably go back to bed, but I couldn't help my curiosity. I quietly snuck downstairs and waited in the stairwell beside the kitchen. A moment later, I heard her come in, overwrought with emotion. Miriam was already waiting for her there. She usually did whenever Annika came home late.

"Anni, my dear girl, what happened?" Miriam asked worriedly.

I peeked out of doorway, just a tiny bit, so I wouldn't intrude upon them.

Annika's green eyes glittered with tears. Her long, blonde hair was tousled and her clothes looked rumpled. She was a mess, which, for Annika, was extremely unusual. Normally, she kept an impeccable appearance, without even the slightest hair out of place.

"He broke it off, Grams. Gabe doesn't want to marry me anymore."

Miriam took Annika in her arms. She patted her head soothingly and stroked her hair, in only the way a loving grandmother could. Annika cried in small, quiet sobs.

"There, there, child. Everything will be alright."

"No, it won't," Annika murmured in a broken voice. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I never even saw it coming."

Annika suddenly pulled away. She stared at Miriam strangely for a moment. "You're not asking me why he called it off. Why?"

Miriam held her breath for a moment too long.

"You know something!" Annika cried. "Don't toy with me, Grams. If you're not telling me something--"

"Anni, stop it. What could I possibly know?"

Annika tilted her head in contemplation. She seemed uneasy. "You've known the Constantins for a long time. And I know that family has hidden secrets."

Miriam sighed exasperatedly. "I don't know any secrets, Anni. Now, I know you're upset. But you really need to try and calm down." She motioned Annika towards a stool. "Sit, and I'll pour you a glass of iced tea."

Annika obeyed despondently, while Miriam searched for glasses.

"Now tell me what he said."

Annika shrugged. "He didn't say much," she said bitterly. "He told me that he cared for me, but wasn't in *love* with me. He said this marriage wouldn't be fair to either of us. Better to break it off now."

Miriam took the tea pitcher out of the refrigerator and brought it to the island. She poured the liquid slowly. "That's strange," she remarked. "Has he never told you he loves you before?"

Annika shook her head. "Now that I think about it, no, he hasn't." She raked her hands through her blonde hair, clearly in frustration. "Was it all a lie, Grams? I always thought he showed his love for me in other ways. I just assumed since Gabe was such an introverted person, he just wasn't capable of saying many words of love. I assumed his proposal of marriage was a clear indication of his feelings. Obviously, I was mistaken.

"And I was the one who pushed him into this wedding...God, how could I have been so blinded? All I was thinking about was how my picture-perfect life was finally coming together. I never stopped to question how he truly felt about me, or anything, for that matter."

Annika broke down again in a choked sob.

I couldn't listen to any more of this conversation. A nonsensical flood of relief rushed through to the very core of me. I was disgusted with myself. What was wrong with me? Why was I relieved to hear Annika's news of her tragic broken engagement?

The poor girl. I felt awful, and at the same time, I felt comforted. Someone seriously needed to lock me away- and then throw away the key! I had to be the most deranged person in the world.

What was worse was that even though I was having trouble sleeping before, this time around I was able to fall straight to sleep as soon as my head touched the pillow, with no concerns over the heat.

SEVEN

Breakfast was dreadfully awkward. Annika and I sat around the large island in the kitchen while Miriam chopped up an assortment of colorful fruits and scrambled egg whites on the stove. Besides the noises Miriam was making from cooking, the room was quiet.

Trying to lighten the mood, I teased Miriam. "Don't you have any bacon?" I asked.

"Bacon causes wrinkles," was her surly reply.

After rolling my eyes, I took a moment to steal a glance at Annika. Surprisingly, she appeared well rested. There were no fatigued circles under her eyes. Her cheeks looked rosy, her hair polished and her clothes wrinkle-free. She held her head high, the same persona of the banal detective I'd come to know. It was almost as if last night never happened.

Almost.

She was unusually anxious. She only sipped at her coffee, drumming her fingers against the porcelain mug and not saying a word. I could tell she was ready for breakfast to be over. Suddenly, I really wished Dakota were here. I was positive that Dakota's carefree nature could ease any tension.

I cleared my throat, trying my best to break the ice. "So Annika, how's your case going?"

My question broke her silent trance, cutting into her thoughts.

"It's going well," she replied after clearing her throat. "I had a dream last night about an important detail, which I believe might lead me to some vital evidence."

"Oh?" I tried to keep the obvious amazement out of my voice.
"Could you tell me about it? I mean, if you're allowed to discuss the details?"

I was in awe over both Annika and Dakota's abilities. When it came to the special sight other gypsies were blessed with, I was continually astounded. And I supposed I was a little envious, as well. I hated how television depicted most psychics to altering degrees of craziness. Because in real life, they are such amazing and brave souls.

"Yeah, I mean, sure. I don't mind." The tone of her voice demonstrated she was relaxing to some extent. I believe she welcomed the conversation. Annika seemed to truly enjoy her job and liked to talk about it. Not to mention she would probably discuss anything rather than to be left alone to dwell on her broken heart.

"A few weeks ago, the Frightwell and Black's Academy was broken into. It was a very strange and curious robbery."

"Wait a second," I interrupted. "Is this the same private school Miriam has enrolled me for the fall semester?"

Annika nodded. "Yes, I believe so. It's the same high school Dakota and I attended."

I raised an eyebrow at Miriam, who was listening from the stove. "Grams, do you hear what kinds of things are happening at this school to whom you're giving all your money?"

Miriam snorted. "Frightwell and Black's happens to be the best school in this county. You just hush up and appreciate the higher education I have privileged you with. Or would you rather attend a public school? You do realize that academically, Florida is one of the lowest-performing schools in this country, don't you? You should be thanking your lucky stars. Now you won't have to learn mathematics by the counting cockroaches along the walls."

"That's very snobbish of you, Grams."

"I find it considerate," she replied.

"Annika just mentioned that Frightwell was broken into recently."

"I heard her, Lo. But thank you for reiterating."

I ignored Miriam's quip and motioned for Annika to continue her story. "She obviously has no real concern for my well-being, as I long as I learn something in the process."

Annika chuckled; the look of desolation seemed to be retreating from her eyes. "So anyway," she continued. "The theft was curious because the thieves had taken some very random things. They stole mostly documents from the main offices at the school. And the students' records were trifled with. There were papers scattered all over the room. The poor secretary, I thought she was going to choke with horror at when she saw the mess she would have to re-organize."

"How bizarre," I commented. "So what was your dream about?"

"Well, I dreamed that whoever this thief was dropped something while he or she was there. I believe this clue will lead me to find the identity of the thief. And from the tone of my dream, I'd bet there is more to this than meets the eye."

"Where did you see this item being dropped?" I asked curiously.

Annika shrugged. "That, I am not sure about. I need to go down to the school today and check out the offices. In my dream, I saw something wedged in between a large machine, like a printer or fax machine."

"Wow, well, I hope you find it," I told her sincerely. "Whatever the strange clue may be."

She smiled. "Thanks. Me too."

"Breakfast is ready," Miriam informed us and then stockpiled our plates full of fruit and egg whites. "Nutritious and low calorie.

Another year I don't have to retire the swimsuit, eh, Anni?"

"Of course, Grams. And you still look fantastic in it," Annika praised. As an aside to me, she said, "She has only recently retired her bikini. She was devastated all last summer about it."

"I'm sure she was," I said, laughing. "Can you tell me where she hides the peanut butter, at least?"

"In the pantry. Third shelf."

"Awesome!"

Miriam clicked her tongue as I opened the pantry door.

"I am going to have to take small steps, Grams, before completely jumping on board to your health-crazed life style."

"In all seriousness, you probably shouldn't. You look like you have slimmed down quite a bit in the short time you've been here."

I looked down at my body. "Really?" I asked excitedly. I lay my hands across my hips. They did seem slightly smaller.

"Lo, I don't think I'm doing you any favors. Your curves are a part of your heritage."

I groaned at her comment. And she knew exactly why.

"One day you will appreciate all the attention much more than you do now," she said.

I wasn't ashamed of my body. I loved my curves, especially when I danced with Lina. My curves made me feel feminine. But at the same time, I hated all the attention that came with it. I'd never been viewed as the typical teenager I was supposed to be viewed as, and that was due to the fact that I didn't look like one.

If I had any will power, I would simply put the jar back into the pantry and enjoy my egg whites. Instead, I picked up a piece of wheat toast and slathered it with the peanut butter. The creamy deliciousness won out over any reservations I might have had.

After breakfast, I decided to go shopping with Miriam. I had a few hours to kill before I started my second day of community service. And Miriam liked to shop, no matter the reason.

The quaint beach town didn't offer many clothing stores nearby.

A few charming boutiques were our only options for the day.

Oddly enough, my lack of clothing reminded me of the many times my troupe would perform in public. Lina had performed for every type of audience, from diplomats to celebrities. We would often end up staying overnight in exclusive, overpriced hotels. Whenever this was the case, we'd sneak into the hotel room suites and steal any designer clothing or shoes we came across. If we found something we liked and that fit, we would take it. If we found jewelry we adored, we would take it, as well.

I guess I didn't realize how awful it was at the time. I only remembered thinking that the wealthy, posh ladies who owned the exorbitant amounts of clothes and bling would hardly notice a few things missing from their wardrobes.

And now I have no clothes, I thought to myself. It was probably justice in the making. Or karma, maybe.

For the first hour, it seemed like I would continue to have no clothes because the shops in town were only either selling beachwear or souvenirs. Thankfully, we found a small boutique, which carried more essential clothing for women. While we were there, I bought heaps of bras and underwear, a few sundresses and a pair of denim shorts. Miriam and I searched for more shops that sold regular clothing, but without any luck. I gave up and decided to buy a few tank tops from a touristy store, and then we called it a day.

"No worries," Miriam told me. "You'll be wearing your school uniform most of the time, anyway. I ordered a shipment the same day you enrolled."

I wasn't exactly a fan of uniforms, but I didn't tell Miriam how I felt. She seemed enthusiastic about it. I suppose it was a gaje thing.

Admittedly, I enjoyed fashion. I liked the clothing Auntie Zetta used to make for me. Even though she sewed either coins or some sort of jewels into almost everything she made, it didn't look garish. It

always felt as if I were wearing a piece of artwork; the end result was ornate, beautiful and one of a kind.

It would be difficult conforming to the norm and wearing a uniform every day. Almost as bad as living in the same town every day. But if nothing else, I was grateful to have *something* to wear.

On the way back to the car, we passed a stand where the peddler sold her own handcrafted jewelry. Miriam and I purchased from her stand. Miriam bought a pearl necklace with a matching ring. I bought numerous different bracelets, each with intricate weaving and jewels inlayed into the fabric. I thought I might offset my future life in uniforms with pretty bracelets.

"You're going to wear them all?" Miriam asked me as I fastened each of my new bracelets to my wrists.

"I can't choose only one."

Miriam raised a brow at this. "Come along, then. I'm starving. What do you say we grab a bite to eat before you start your community service?"

"Sounds great."

I followed as she headed into another direction. "I know a great place that sells the most amazing spinach salads. . ."

EIGHT

I was under the impression that my first few days of school were supposed to be dreadful. I wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe from movies and television. So it was a nice surprise to realize that it wasn't as horrible as I was expecting. The whole experience was actually kind of fascinating. There were so many complexities to high school life.

I especially loved the element of mixing different subjects all in one day. On the road we had an appointed professor, Katzi. But Professor Katzi would only teach one subject at a time. And even though we roamed the planet, the setting always felt the same. There were only so many topics one professor could bring to the table; therefore, learning sometimes became boring and mundane.

When I found out I would be taking six subjects all in one dayand from *six* different professors, I was afraid I might be overwhelmed. But now I was starting to think that learning a small portion of a subject each day would help me to retain everything.

Biology class was my favorite, though I enjoyed music class as well. The only awkward time of the day for me was eating lunch. The patios were filled with students conversing. Everyone seemed to already know each other, had already made friends. And I didn't know where to go or who to fit in with.

I was positive there wasn't a single student who didn't know who I was. Although it was the beginning of the school year, it was a

still small school and news traveled fast. I was labeled as the new girl here. Well, technically I was one of four new students in the junior class, though still the only girl.

I heard the whispers, saw the stares. The other students gossiped about me left and right, wondering where I had transferred from, why I wore so many bracelets, if my boobs were fake, how much money my family was worth (apparently every student at this school came from a wealthy family), if my butt was fake, how big my house was, why I didn't drive my own car, if my lips were injected and so on, and so on. I heard most of these topics come up in the girl's bathroom. I was surprised that everyone was so vocal about their curiosity, but then again, it was a small school.

I waited until all the girls had left the bathroom before I came out of my stall, causing me to be late for my second period class. I lied to the teacher, telling her I ended up getting lost on the campus. The teacher believed my lie without even questioning me. It was probably because the majority of the gaje became lost on a regular basis. It amazed me how hard it was for some people to find their way around. Even though I pretty much sucked at being a gypsy, I could at least claim an incredible sense of direction. I knew how to quickly scan a map and learn a location within seconds. But most times, I didn't even need a one. I just seemed to find my own way. I knew it wasn't much, but since I couldn't see into the future and I had no recollection of my past lives, I figured at least it's *something*.

When lunchtime came, I ate alone on a cement bench in the courtyard, out of sight from the rest of the students. It felt nice to have

a moment of peace in the busy day. I searched around in my satchel until I found my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I had specifically made this sandwich for myself because I felt like it was the epitome of the American school lunch. Something I had never experienced until now.

"It's Lola, right?"

I turned, facing the bench to the left of me, pushing my lenses closer to my eyes. Surprised, I found a boy I'd heard called "Cam" sitting there. I recognized him because Professor Larson had kicked him out of history class earlier. They had gotten into an argument about one of the World Wars. Cam had informed the professor that he was teaching his class the wrong information. He told the professor (with a completely straight face) that our history books were filled with a bunch of bullshit. It was rather amusing. Many of the students had chuckled in the background of their argument.

"Yes, that's me," I answered him. He was wearing his polo shirt with the collar popped up and his iPod was attached to his ears in the trendy, delinquent fashion I noticed seem to be all the rage among members of this school. It seemed the students here found small ways to stand out against the crowd.

"Well, it's nice to finally meet you," he said. "We happen to be neighbors."

"We are?" I asked, surprised. There were only two houses near the area where Miriam lived. One had been abandoned and the other was the. . . "Wait a second, you live in that huge mansion in front of the pier?"

Cam took a bite of his bread roll and nodded. Between bites, he stated, "Yup. That's me."

His personality made somewhat more sense to me now. He walked around like he was superior to everyone and everything. Almost as if he were wasting time going to school when he had better things to do, more important places he needed to be. I supposed it would have been a completely horrible trait for most people, but Cam carried a sort of conviction about him, which slightly redeemed him for his snobbishness.

"So, Lola, where did *you* come from? The student body has come up with all kinds of rumors."

I rolled my eyes, annoyed with the endless gossip. I was used to most people taking notice of me, though not for much longer than a glance since I never stuck around in one place long enough for anyone to start talking. It was weird, being the central focus of conversation. And I really didn't like it.

"Which ones have you heard?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, the usual. You're a rich heiress that lost her parents in a tragic accident. There is another one about how you were kicked out of your last school. Oh, and some believe you're a European model."

I could feel him scrutinizing my expression. I suspected he was trying to shock me. "My favorite one is your parents were drug lords who were caught and sentenced to life in prison."

Cam smirked at this. I sat up straight and stiffened, widening my eyes until they were rotund saucers. "How do they *know*?"

Cam's expression paled and his jaw dropped. But when he saw the grin tugging at my lips, he broke into laughter and I couldn't help but laugh, too.

"Nice one," he said. "I like you already."

"Well, that's awesome," I remarked happily. "Because I don't have any friends yet. Do you mind if I enlist you for the position?"

"Not at all. We are fellow Roms, are we not?"

My body went entirely still. I had completely forgotten. He was a Constantin, obviously. He was Gabe's brother. But Cam didn't really look much like Gabe, which is probably why it hadn't even occurred to me that they were brothers- or that Cam was of gypsy descent. Cam's hair was shaggy and blonde, whereas Gabe's was dark and thick. The structure of their faces seemed different, but now that I was looking for it, I noticed their eyes bore the same shade of dark gray. The only difference was that Cam seemed to possess a lively sparkle in his. There was no sparkle in Gabe's eyes. They were just dark and penetrating. . .

"Lola, are you alright? It's just that you're Miriam's granddaughter and so I assumed that that's what you are. . .I didn't know for sure. Are you a *Rom*? I won't tell anyone, you know. It's my secret, too."

I shrugged, a little dazed from thoughts of Gabe. "Yeah, I'm a *Rom*. And it's no big deal," I said. "I knew you and your brothers were-- I mean Miriam told me about you and how you are--"

"Abandoners?" he finished for me.

"Yeah," I admitted, sheepishly. Abandoners were frowned upon in gypsy society and were usually never again welcomed amongst the tribes. Strangely enough, I was relieved to hear Cam say it. It meant we had something in common. Though I hadn't intended to leave the gypsy world behind, there would be many who would consider me a disgrace to have left my father's troupe.

Gypsy women never left their father, with the exception of marriage. On the other hand, if a man left his own troupe, it was usually out of disloyalty. And once a man had become disloyal, it was a discredit to his name. I couldn't help but wonder why Cam and his family had chosen abandonment.

"Does it bother you?" Cam asked me a few moments later.

"What? Of course not! I'd have to be a hypocrite for it to bother me."

"Ah, so you are a fellow abandoner," he surmised. "I have to admit I didn't expect you to be one. There are so few of them."

"I guess that's what I am. I ran away. And since I really don't intend to go back any time soon, I suppose that would make me an abandoner."

"It's nothing to feel guilty about," Cam said.

"Who told you I feel guilty?"

"Nobody. I can hear it in your tone."

"Oh. So you have some kind of special ability?"

I had not intended my question to be perceived as a joke, but Cam laughed at me. "Yeah. It's called humanity," he replied. I'm not sure why, but I didn't like that Cam was laughing at me. I guess it just annoyed me how easily I could be read.

"I am completely normal-- disappointingly. What about you?" he asked.

"I'm normal, too," I said. A little bit too normal, unfortunately. Too much like the gaje. But I didn't relay to Cam the fact that I couldn't remember my past lives.

"My brother Gabe can see things."

"Oh really?" I tried not to sound very interested. "So what does your brother see?"

"He can see everything around him, within a few miles' distance."

"You mean, like *everything*?" I looked downwards, trying to appear somewhat nonchalant. If I could hear the curiosity practically dripping from my voice, there was no doubt that Cam could too.

"Yeah. If I take our dog out for a walk, Gabe can see exactly where I am in the neighborhood- but only if he is looking for it. He can see the present happenings surrounding him. It's very weird. I've never met anyone who can see in the same way he can."

A lot of gypsies referred to their psychic abilities as the ability to "see." I believed it was common for them to feel as if they had a second sight.

"That is weird," I agreed. "I've never come across anything like it either."

I suddenly found myself wondering if Gabe could see me in Miriam's house. The thought was a little creepy. . .and yet oddly

comforting. I wondered if he saw me the night in the storm. Was it because of Gabe that I was rescued?

Thankfully, Cam's voice regained my attention. "My third eldest brother, Rex, can sense things too. But he never talks about it."

"How many brothers do you have in all?"

"Just three. Baro, Gabe and Rex. We have a sister, too, Molly. She attends Frightwell. She's a senior."

"Wow. It must be interesting, having such a full house. I don't have any siblings, so I've never really known what its like, that bond."

"Really? That's odd for a Rom."

"Well, my mother died at a young age."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was a long time ago." I shrugged.

I heard the afternoon bell tolling from the courtyard and students began packing up their things to leave. I was disappointed to leave so soon. Although I was enjoying the school day, it was nice to have this small reprieve.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Lola," Cam said to me genuinely. And then with a note of hostility, he added, "Time to blend in with the rest of the gaje now."

"You don't enjoy this?" I asked, lightly chuckling.

He raised a thick blonde eyebrow at me that clearly conveyed his feelings.

"With that expression, I think I can guess for myself."

~ ~

After the school day was finished, I raced home to remove my starchy uniform before starting my volunteer work. It felt great to be able to take it off. For some reason, I really detested those clothes. Afterwards, I threw on a much less restricting purple t-shirt and the pair of jean shorts I purchased with Miriam.

On my way to the beach, I decided I should probably cut down my service to two or three times a week instead of going every day. It was only the first day of school and I already had a pile of homework waiting for me back at the house. Since Miriam was spending so much money on my education, I really didn't want to disappoint her with bad grades.

I checked in with the other volunteers, who usually met at the pier. We all had to check-in with our district leader, who supplied us with golf carts and trash bags for collection. Our district leader was a firefighter named Hank. He looked like he was in his late fifties, but he was in good shape; his shoulders were broad and his arms were massive. I supposed there weren't too many fires to worry about in this small town, which was probably the reason he landed his position with Habitat for Humanity. But he was perfect for the job. He was a no-nonsense, very stern man. He rarely smiled, either. He simply handed out instructions along with the trash bags. I suspected he was forced to take on that persona because most of the volunteers were there on court orders. And many of the others were high school students trying to gain their required community service hours.

As I made my way to the front of the line, Hank handed me a trash bag and a set of keys.

"Name?" he asked.

"Lola Moori," I answered.

"Do you have papers?" he asked.

"No, sir." He glanced down at me after checking my name off of his clipboard.

"You do know you're supposed to bring them to receive credit, right?"

"The hours aren't required at my school. I attend Frightwell and Black's."

Hank raised a brow skeptically. "And you're not here through the juvenile court?"

"No, sir."

Hank slightly shook his head and then shrugged. "All right, then. I just wanted to make sure you were getting your credits. I've seen how hard you've been busting your butt out there. It's nice to see someone do it for nothing for a change."

I heard the sounds of a few people groaning behind me. A wave of heat rushed to my cheeks. I gave Hank a small smile and quickly made my way to my designated golf cart while he signaled the next person.

If he only knew, I thought to myself. If he only knew I should be forced to do this work. I should be spending the next ten to fifteen years of my life doing manual labor. It didn't feel right letting Hank

believe I was merely a fellow environmentalist. But I didn't dare tell him the truth.

I headed towards my assigned area of the beach, which was always next to Miriam's house as I requested. As soon as I got there, I was in for quite a surprise. Another row of soda cans had been strategically set out, and they were leading towards the pier I found them near the last time.

I was even more furious this time around. I couldn't understand how someone could not only leave their trash behind, but they even made an effort to leave it behind in a scornful way. I was practically fuming as I picked up can after can. I searched the beach for the culprit, but just to add to my luck, it was completely quiet today. There was no one around. No one in sight. And no one getting caught.

Just like before, the soda cans stopped at the pier, with no explanation. They simply ended.

After I was done picking all of them up, I found myself heading down the docks towards Gabe's boat. I wasn't sure if he would be there, but I was too curious to leave without looking for him. I knew I shouldn't seek him out. The man had been horribly oblivious to me the other day. Not to mention he was now Annika's ex-fiancé. But for some reason, I sought him out, anyway.

When I didn't immediately find him, I was extremely disappointed. And then I became upset with myself for looking for him in the first place.

You must be a fool, I thought to myself. I was just about to leave when out of nowhere, I turned around and he was suddenly standing behind me on the dock, with a toolbox in tow.

Now that I was so close to him, the full impact of being able to view his disturbingly handsome features in vivid detail left me slightly breathless.

"You again?" he said to me in a very non-enthusiastic tone of voice. "What is this time? Or is it still the cans?"

When I didn't immediately answer, he merely sidestepped me and hopped onto his boat as if I were the last person in the world he cared to see at the moment.

His lack of manners astounded me, for the second time around. Yet I was somewhat appreciative of his awful behavior because it began overshadowing his good looks, and it allowed me a moment to find my voice.

"Actually," I declared. "I *am* here to ask you about the cans, but not the same ones as before. Today I found another row of them!

They led me straight to this pier, just like the last time."

"And what do you want me to do about it?" His back was still the only part of him facing me.

My muscles stiffened. I crossed my arms in front of me, completely pissed off. Tilting my head to the side, I asked, "Well, you've been the only one out here both times. How do I know it wasn't *you* who left the cans for me to clean up?"

My mouth parted as I realized what I'd just said. I couldn't believe I was actually accusing him of being the mysterious can-

culprit, but the words were out of my mouth before I could stop myself. This time he did turn towards me, looking at me as if I were a lunatic. Arching a high brow, he asked, "Are you serious?"

I flinched. "Well, if it wasn't you, then who was it? It looks like you've been out here for a while working on your boat. And it had to have taken the person with the cans hours to set them up like that.

How were you not able to see who it was?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I haven't been looking for a crazy person wandering about and leaving their soda cans behind. I'm working here. Or wasn't that obvious to you?"

His tone was harsh. I backed up a little, less mighty now. "I just assumed you might have noticed something out of the ordinary."

"Well, I didn't. So why don't you go down to the police station and report it since you're so fired up about it?"

I paused for a moment to consider his advice, even as sarcastically intended as it may have been given. "Actually-- that's a good idea."

"Great. That's just great, little girl. Run along, then. I'm busy."

I didn't like the way he said *little girl*. He reminded me of my grandmother. It didn't bother me when my Miriam said it, but that was because I actually *was* a little girl compared to her fifty plus years of age, or however old she was. I wasn't really sure of her age. I'd asked her once and she told me, "It's none of your business, thank you very much." So I dropped the subject. Anyway, Miriam was much older than Gabe.

For the first time ever, I think I was annoyed at someone for making me feel so young. It was ironic, because for so long I just wanted everyone to see me as a teenager. Maybe Miriam was right. Maybe I was losing too much weight. Maybe I was losing my curves. The idea didn't thrill me as much anymore.

"My name is Lola," I suddenly told him, feeling the need to point it out. "And we're neighbors, by the way."

He had turned his back to me again, already dismissing me from his presence. All he said was, "I know who you are."

I started to turn away and leave, but then stopped and turned back again. "I wanted to say thank you to you and your brothers for coming to help me that night of the storm."

"Strange type of thank you," he said mockingly. "Sounded more like you were here to make accusations."

"Yeah, well, sorry about that, too. . .I think we got off on the wrong foot."

He didn't say anything more. He just nodded. I had already begun walking away when I heard him say, "You're welcome." He'd said it so quietly, it was almost as if he hadn't wanted me to hear him say it in the first place.

Gabe was such an odd person. An odd, beautiful and rude person. Admittedly, I was still intrigued by him. I really wished I wasn't. For Annika's sake, if nothing else. But I just couldn't help it.

NINE

A few days later, I decided to walk to the local police station after school. Miriam gave me one of her old maps of the town so I would know how to get there. It was supposed to only be a few blocks west, but it felt like a *thousand* blocks west. And it didn't help that the outside air felt like the inside of a sauna. It was mid-September, but it still felt like summer-- and *so* humid to boot.

I tried to keep in mind how much I prided myself on being able to easily adapt to any type of environment. I was a gypsy, and gypsy girls adapt to change, dammit. But this was hard to remember while I sweated in my ridiculous uniform. Why they forced us to wear thickly padded skirts and stockings in this heat and humidity was beyond me. Drenching with sweat, I realized the sun had clearly chosen me as its personal target.

Once at the station, I told an elderly woman at the front desk I would like to report a crime. She instructed me to sign in and take a seat in the waiting area. An icy, cold air vent was next to my seat. I practically clung to it, sighing in relief.

Ten minutes later, I was ushered by the same elderly woman into one of the offices in the back of the station. The detective was in the middle of eating a sandwich when I walked in. He set the food down and wiped his hands with his napkin before shaking my hand in greeting.

"Hello, young lady, I'm Detective Paco Vasquez. Sorry about the timing. I was just finishing my lunch."

Detective Vasquez was a short and chubby Hispanic man with the bushiest mustache I'd ever seen. His mustache held remnants of his sandwich's breadcrumbs. It made him look more like a cartoon character than a real life person.

I smiled. "That's alright," I said. "My name is Lola Moori. It's nice to meet you, sir."

He nodded towards the chair in front of his desk.

"Please take a seat. I just need to grab a form and then we can get started."

I waited patiently while he shuffled through papers in a large filing cabinet along the wall.

My eyes wandered around the room, observing the surroundings. I could tell the station was very laid back. There was a mellow atmosphere in the building, the walls painted in light blues and greens, and it seemed quieter than I'd anticipated. Not that I frequented many police stations. In fact, I usually tried to steer clear of them. Even so, I imagined this one was atypical. I suppose there wasn't much crime that occurred in sleepy beach towns. Most of the officers even sported shorts as a part of their uniform. Detective Vasquez was even more casual. He wore a bright green polo shirt and khaki shorts with brown loafers. Whoever was responsible for the Frightwell and Black's uniform seriously needed to get with the program- take a leaf from their police station's book.

When the detective finally found the form he was looking for, he sat down at his desk and took out a pen. "Alright, please state what happened."

I began to tell him about the mysterious can-culprit. I recounted every detail of each of the incidents. After a while, however, I couldn't help but notice the detective's blasé expression.

He looked bored.

I began to feel a little silly for even being here. It all felt very trivial now that I'd actually come to the police station and began describing what had happened. Detective Vasquez remained courteous, though. He simply asked me a few questions here and there about details such as the time of day and the location the cans had been placed in.

Another officer knocked on the glass window of Detective Vasquez's door, interrupting my story. I was thankful to have been interrupted. This wasn't going as well as I had expected.

"Come in," he called out. He signaled to me to wait a moment.

"Hey, Paco. I need your report so I can finish up my paperwork."

The voice triggered immediate recognition. I glanced up from where I was sitting.

"Patience is a virtue, Constantin. I'm still not through with it yet."

I jerked my head up, almost falling out of my seat when I heard the name said aloud. "Are you kidding me?" I couldn't help but cry out. They both turned towards me now. As the man by the door began to recognize me, his expression turned into one of amusement.

"Well, hello there," Gabe said with a note of innocence in his voice.

"You can go to hell," was my surly reply. I grabbed my bag and stood to leave.

"Young lady, please watch your language," Detective Vasquez admonished me, though he wasn't menacing. He only seemed confused. "Do you two know each other?"

"We're neighbors," Gabe replied, still apparently amused, even though he could clearly see how upset I'd become. He'd made me the butt of some joke. And I couldn't believe he'd let me come all the way down to the police station, not once mentioning the fact that he was an officer himself.

"She doesn't sound very neighborly towards you," Detective Vasquez pointed out.

"Yeah, I noticed that, too," Gabe said. "I'll take this one off your hands, Paco. Just hurry with my report, okay?"

The detective nodded, shooing us out of his office. "Go on. I don't want to know." He seemed relieved to be rid of me- much to my further annoyance.

I stormed out after that, attempting a grand, theatrical exit.

"You don't have to worry about taking me off his hands," I said to Gabe, while making my way out of the office. "I was finished, anyway."

"Well, it doesn't really matter," he told me. "Because I filed the complaint the first time you mentioned the cans."

I swung around to face him. "And why couldn't you have mentioned that little detail to me sooner?"

Gabe merely shrugged. "You didn't ask."

I shook my head. My temper was at an all-time high, even for my usually calm demeanor. There was something about this man's arrogance that infuriated me. I knew I should leave before I did something stupid, like hit him in his perfectly chiseled jaw.

"Come on now, don't be so angry. Let me take you home at least."

"No, thanks," I said and turned away,

"Why not?"

"I'd rather walk."

He followed me outside as I shoved open the glass doors of the station.

"It's extremely hot," he pointed out. "And it's nearly four miles. You were in agony on the way here."

"I don't care," I lied.

And then it occurred to me that he had been watching me, knowing I walked all the way here in the midst of this heat. He'd known I sweated like a pig on my way here because of that awful uniform. I became angrier, if it were even possible.

"You spied on me!"

"What are you talking about? I didn't spy on you."

"Cam told me what you can do and I know you spied on me!"

Gabe scanned our surroundings. "Keep your voice down," he ordered me. "Cam has a big mouth, obviously. But I wasn't spying. I could see you walking here. So what?"

"Whatever." I turned my back to him. "You'll also see me walking away from here."

I left, heading down the sidewalk. *Stupid beast*, I thought to myself.

And then he called out to me.

"Lola."

For some bizarre reason, I stopped in my tracks. The way he said my name. . .it was so familiar. I've heard my name said a million times before by many different people, but hearing him say it was something altogether different. It was almost nice in a soothing sort of way, a way in which I could not even begin to explain.

As I turned around to face him again, I noticed for the first time he was the only one I'd seen at the police station wearing a suit and tie. He looked rather striking. Out of curiosity, I really wanted to ask him why he bothered when everyone else dressed so casually. But then I thought better of it.

"Hey, do you like smoothies?"

"What?" I asked, dazed.

"Do you like smoothies?"

"I heard you the first time. I just didn't understand the point of the question."

"We happen to be standing in front of a smoothie stand and I would like to grab one before I take you back to Miriam's."

I looked to my right and noticed a brightly colored cart parked across the street with pictures of assorted fruits painted onto it.

"So how 'bout it?"

I was slightly incredulous. It seemed like he was trying to pretend like my anger didn't exist. "I told you I want to walk," I answered. "And I don't need you to buy me a smooth--"

"All right, fine. I'll call Miriam and tell her to come get you since it's so inconveniencing for you to let me drive you home."

I angled a brow and cocked my head to the side. "You're going to use blackmail just so you can give me a ride?"

"Yes."

"That's ridiculous."

"So does that mean you want me to call her? I have her on speed dial, you know. She *is* my neighbor."

I sighed, losing my patience. Truthfully, I really didn't want to walk home in the heat. And I had been in agony on the way here.

I bit my bottom lip, debating. Finally, I gave in. "This doesn't make up for what you did-- and neither does the smoothie." I figured I might as well add that last bit about the smoothie since I was already caving. I was thirsty, anyway.

But Gabe looked as if he couldn't care less what I forgave him for or not. He only seemed appeased that I was allowing him to take me home. I wondered why he even cared, though I supposed he was doing it for Miriam. He could let himself believe he was some sort of Good Samaritan, for all I cared.

I knew better.

Gabe walked over to the smoothie stand while I waited for him across the street. Apparently he was some kind of regular there because I could hear the young, female cashier greet him by name. And then she proceeded to giggle over something he'd said to her. I rolled my eyes. Apparently, there were people who actually liked Gabe, maybe even adored him. I couldn't quite wrap my head around it. The only aspects of his personality I'd been exposed to were his arrogance and his rudeness. I couldn't even begin to guess why Annika had fallen for someone like him. I'd admit the man was intriguing, but that was his only decent quality. And it certainly didn't redeem him for his bad manners.

He walked back over to me and handed me a Styrofoam cup. "This way," he said as he directed me to the parking lot behind the police station.

I sipped the smoothie, appreciative for anything made of ice. The frozen drink seemed to be highly popular in this state, and for good reason.

"It's pineapple," I remarked, surprised.

"Is that all right?" he asked.

"Yeah. . .it's my favorite."

He observed me, a strange look building in his gray eyes. "I suppose it was a lucky guess."

A really lucky guess, in my opinion. But I didn't comment on it. I decided I might try to sustain from being horribly mean to him on the way home since he'd picked out an excellent smoothie.

Gabe led me to an older, black Ford Ranger, opening the door for me.

Slightly chivalrous- I would add that to my list of possible good attributes.

"What no BMW? No Mercedes Benz? I must say I'm surprised, especially after seeing your mansion."

"I'm on government salary, remember? And besides, I need room for the board." He nodded his head to the bright orange, Ron Jon surfboard harboring in the bed of his truck.

"I didn't peg you for a surfer. Aren't you on the wrong coast for that?"

I'd come to find out that Florida's Gulf coast was relatively calm compared to the Atlantic coast. Most surfers preferred to stick to the Atlantic, where the waves were much more likely to exist.

While starting the engine, he told me, "There are some decent waves every now and then. Especially in the winter."

I'd always wanted to learn how to surf, but I'd never pursued it. I'd certainly had the opportunity, being surrounded by many oceans on many different occasions. But I just never got around to it. Maybe I could attempt it soon, I mused.

We'd pulled out of the parking lot and drove out onto Main Street when I noticed Gabe looking into his rearview mirror for a long period of time.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I think someone's following us."

I felt myself tense anxiously as I scouted out the area. "Are you sure?" I asked. "Who is it?" I immediately presumed that Luca and some of my Dad's lackeys came to retrieve me. The thought paralyzed me with fear. It wasn't a fear of my Dad's men. And it wasn't a fear of being forced to leave. I was ready to go anywhere at almost any time. It was part and parcel of the genes I had inherited. Instead, it was a fear of facing my dad.

I just wasn't prepared for that yet.

"They're a few streets down, but they're driving parallel to us. I could be wrong. We might just be headed in the same direction."

"You're probably not," I informed him, sighing. "I suppose someone had to come looking for me sooner or later."

He glanced over at me, raising a brow. "Lola, is your family searching for you?"

I shrugged and sunk back into the seat. "I don't know."

"Are you afraid of them? Would they hurt you in any way?"

"What?" I asked, caught off guard. "Oh, no. Not at all. Well, sometimes I do feel like a sacrificial lamb."

I noticed his expression had become entirely confused and so I explained. "My father arranged a life for me that I wasn't very happy about. It's the reason I decided to leave."

"What kind of life?"

I debated whether or not I should tell him. I figured he should understand. Prostitution was very common amongst gypsy tribes. Since the beginning of our ancestries, if a woman didn't choose marriage, they sought to support themselves in other ways. They lived

to pleasure men by dancing, fortune telling or taking them to bed for a few coins. In modern times, the practices hadn't changed all that much.

I assumed he knew of the traditions and so I finally decided to go ahead and tell him. "He planned to sell me to a madam with a very elite clientele."

Gabe stared ahead for a moment until it dawned on him what I was saying. At first, he stayed very quiet, which didn't surprise me. Most people simply accepted that way of life. It was a part of our culture.

But then Gabe began cursing- loudly, and in Romanian. I wasn't fluent, but I could comprehend some of what he was saying. If I was translating it correctly, I heard him shout an expletive that meant 'always hell'. I didn't really understand why he said that, but I didn't ask, either. Then, startling me, he banged on the steering wheel a few times with his fist.

When he calmed down, he glanced over at me.

My eyes were still wide with shock at his outburst. After a moment, I said, "Well, that's pretty much how I felt about it, too."

The angry expression he bore turned into one of surprise and then completely melted away as he softly chuckled.

"Sorry," he said while sighing. "I just hate the backwards practices that continue to happen."

"You don't have to apologize to me."

"I'm glad you stood up for yourself and decided not to go through with it," he said. He sounded like he genuinely meant it. Who was this person? I found myself wondering what happened to the abominably rude man I met on the docks.

"I think I'm going to take a few odd turns and back roads, just in case we are being followed," he told me.

The rest of the drive was quiet. But even through the silence, I was completely absorbed by Gabe's presence. I tried closing my eyes, tried forgetting he was there. But it was no use. I remained on edge for the rest of the ride home.

Soon enough, we pulled into the driveway. I immediately unbuckled my seatbelt and hopped out of the car.

I grabbed my school bag and turned towards the house when I realized Gabe was behind me. I paused for a moment. "Thank you for driving me home," I said, waiting for him to get back into his car and leave. He didn't leave. All he said was, "No problem."

"Have a nice day," I said, attempting another obvious dismissal.

But he walked directly in front of me, towards the front door.

Miriam left it open at this time of day, letting the ocean breezes flow into the house. Gabe walked right inside, as if it were his house.

I couldn't help but feel aggravated by the level of comfort he must feel for Miriam. And, well, if I was being truthful, I was more annoyed at the level of comfort he must feel because of Annika. I cursed myself silently.

I had no idea where this delusion I had been harboring, the one that made me feel like I held a claim over Gabe, had ever come from. But I was determined to return to sanity as quickly as possible. With that thought resolute in my mind, I dismissed Gabe from my sight and

headed upstairs towards my bedroom. I didn't care why he decided to come inside or who he wanted to talk to. And honestly, I *shouldn't* care.

I would simply distract myself until he left. Homework, I thought to myself. There is tons of homework to do.

Emptying my school bag onto my bed, I filed through my notebooks. Pausing, I heard myself sigh. I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate.

Why was he still here, anyway? What did he want? Was he looking for Annika? I gulped, realizing the possibility that they may have made up. I lifted my pillow to my face and groaned into it. *What was going on?* My mind screamed.

I needed to find out.

I headed back downstairs, looking for Gabe. I walked through the empty living room and heard voices coming from out back.

Miriam was in the backyard attending to her garden. I moved towards the sliding glass door. It had been left open and so I peeked through the blinds. It seemed I'd been doing so much spying these days, it was starting to come naturally.

Gabe had his back to me. His hands were in his suit pockets. I couldn't see his face to read his expression, but I could tell the conversation was serious by the hard lines in Miriam's face. She was wearing a bright yellow sundress, with blue stripes and a matching blue scarf. It was a cheerful outfit. She must have been in a good mood before Gabe approached her.

"I can't say I approve of whatever it is you're doing," I heard her say to Gabe. Her voice was low and tense.

"Miriam, you know I never meant to hurt Anni."

Though they spoke quietly, I could still make out some of their muffled conversation.

Miriam shook her head, sighing. "What good do you think could possibly come from this?"

"What is it, Miriam? Do you think I harbor some sort of secret yearning that she might remember me?"

Miriam merely shrugged.

"Well, you would be absolutely right. I know you don't want to hear that, but it's the truth."

Miriam stopped watering her stargazers and looked up at him now, frowning. There was a passion in Gabe's voice and demeanor I'd never heard before. It was intense, and a little frightening.

"I pray every single day of this semblance of a life that she will wake up and remember she's in love with me."

Miriam stood up. Her expression was painted with obvious disapproval. "And what then, Gabe? Tell me what would happen if she did remember?"

"I could protect her!"

Miriam snorted derisively. "And if you couldn't? You would never forgive yourself and you know it."

Gabe couldn't seem to answer her. He hunkered down, onto a nearby bench. He stroked his hands through his hair, looking rather

exhausted. Suddenly, he looked up at Miriam with wide eyes. "*Damn*," he muttered under his breath.

"What?" she asked, confused. Her head started to turn towards the house in the direction he was eyeing. "*Ohhh*," she murmured in realization.

I quickly moved away from the blinds, crouching down behind the wall. I winced, feeling like an idiot. How could I completely forget that Gabe had the ability to see me? How could I forget such an important detail? I had to make this look like I wasn't eavesdropping-and quickly!

I moved from my spot and headed out into the backyard, approaching Miriam and Gabe. They both stared at me curiously, which made me feel even more awkward.

"I didn't mean to intrude on your conversation. I just needed to ask you something, Grams."

"Yes?" she asked.

I racked my brain for something, *anything* to say at that moment. But nothing was coming to me. Why oh why did I even bother trying to cover up the fact that I was spying? It had to be painfully obvious to them either way.

"Um, where can I find the laundry detergent?"

It sounded lame, but it was the only question I could think of.

"The laundry detergent?"

"Yes, I need to wash my uniforms. They're um, starchy."

My grandmother arched a curiously high brow.

"It's in the laundry room. In the shelf above the washer." It was a matter-of-fact statement. I could feel the blush creep into my cheeks.

"Thanks. Uh, would you like me to wash anything for you?"
"I believe there are a few sets of sheets in the hamper."

I nodded and turned to leave. The sooner I could get myself out of this awkward situation, the better.

I breathed in and out as I left the patio, not realizing I'd been holding my breath nearly the entire time. I was happy to get out of there. I still felt like such a fool. There was no doubt in my mind they both knew I'd been lying. But what else was I supposed to say? That I was spying because I was entirely too fascinated by the neighbor? That even though he could be rude and deceitful, I still found him alluring? Should I have said that my very own body wills itself to Gabe's presence, like he was a magnet and I couldn't help but be drawn towards him?

No, I definitely couldn't tell the truth.

Besides, I was embarrassed of myself as it was. There was no need to further that embarrassment. Not to mention that Miriam would fly through the roof if she knew her seventeen-year-old granddaughter had developed a sort of crush on a twenty-something-year-old man. Even my own father would disapprove. Well, that wasn't true, I supposed. Christo would approve of anyone who was wealthy.

I found myself wondering who Gabe had been referring to-- this mystery woman who had forgotten him. He had sounded so forlorn

about it. And I was more than a little jealous by the way he talked about her. It sounded as if. . .as if he *loved* her. Could it be true? Could Gabe love someone who didn't reciprocate that love for him? And was that why he broke off the engagement with Annika? It hardly made sense to me. Who could possibly forget someone like Gabe? He was much too striking. I knew that *I* could never forget someone like him.

"Lola!"

I smiled at Dakota's excitement as she hurried in through the foyer, dropping her bags to the floor.

"I'm so happy to see you're still here!" She threw her arms around me in hug so wrenchingly tight that I couldn't breathe for a moment.

I laughed as soon as she let go of me. I had missed Dakota's cheerful nature. "You didn't think I would be?" I asked curiously.

She shrugged and said, "The gypsy life is hard to let go of. We don't all have the strength to stick around in one spot for very long. And I guess I'm a little surprised you decided to stay. You struck me as a wanderer."

I considered what she said. "I suppose I am a little surprised at myself," I admitted. "I've never stayed in one place so long before.

But I don't feel that horrible restlessness I usually do at this point."

"Well, *I*, for one, am certainly happy you don't feel it. It's nice having you around."

I smiled, flattered. "What brings you into town so early?" I asked. "I didn't expect you 'til Thanksgiving."

"I decided to skip two of my classes so I could come home early. I always attend the Fall Festival and the Constantin party. It's the talk of the town, you know. Nothing much else happens on Clearwater Beach."

I'd been hearing people gossip about the Constantin party at school. Apparently, the town held a festival along the beach every year and the Constantin family threw a huge party at the same time. I'd seen for myself the extravagances being shipped next door. Giant tents were set up. Truckloads of food were unloaded. Laborers were even putting together small carnival rides. It was impressive by anyone's standards. Still, I refused to go.

"So I see you've started school at Frightwell," Dakota mentioned, breaking into my thoughts. "And I also see you've been..." she shut her eyes, searching for something and tilting her head. "Have you been doing volunteer work?" she opened her eyes now, perplexed.

"How did you know? Did Miriam tell you?"

"No," Dakota grinned. "I saw it when I hugged you."

I scrunched my brows together, shaking my head. "No wonder you're so affectionate. Especially when it gives you the chance to spy on people."

Dakota grabbed her suitcase and headed for the hallway. "I couldn't possibly know what you're talking about."

I laughed, despite myself. And then I stopped short. Thankfully, Dakota was already in her room at that point. I abruptly realized everything I might have let Dakota see about me. Everything about my father, everything about Gabe. . .it was too much of a risk. As much as I would hate it, I knew I should take extra precautions to stay away from Dakota while she was here. Because she couldn't find out that I betrayed my father. And she definitely couldn't find out about

my inexplicable feelings for Gabe, which completely betrayed Annika. I would absolutely die of shame.

"Come in here, I have something for you," Dakota called from her room.

I stood in the entryway, trying to not move anywhere near her. I watched as she removed a garment bag from her suitcase and carefully unzipped it. She pulled out a silver dress, holding it up so I could view it.

It was beautiful. Shiny, intricate jewels on the hems of the capped-sleeves formed a pattern up across the shoulder. The bust of the dress was tightly woven, which would cling closely to the wearer's torso and would probably reveal a racy amount of décolletage. From the hip downwards, it flowed into a shimmering pool of silver silk, which would cut right above the knees.

"It's for you," she informed me. "I picked it out at the mall in Tampa. Do you like it?"

I was stunned for a moment, trying to comprehend that Dakota was giving me this beautiful dress. When I finally found my voice, all I could say was, "For what?"

Dakota giggled. "For the festival, silly. After the day events, the Constantins' throw this huge, glamorous party, which is more like a ball because it's so grand. I knew you didn't have anything to wear, so I thought I would come prepared."

I smiled ruefully. "That's very sweet of you, Dakota, but I wasn't planning on going."

Dakota put her hands on her hips. Her mouth slightly parted, as if I had shocked her. "What do you *mean* you weren't planning to go? This is the biggest event for miles around. And we are actually *invited*."

I didn't know what to say. And I couldn't very well tell her my real reasons. So I simply shrugged. "I just wasn't planning to go," I mumbled.

She raised a stubborn brow. "Well, you are now. I took my time picking out this dress. The cut should be perfect for your frame. Now try it on and tell me how it fits."

I opened my mouth to argue, but then shut it again. This wouldn't have been so difficult if she hadn't done something that was so very *nice*. I definitely hadn't expected her to buy me a dress. And I had no idea I would have even been presumed to attend the party in the first place.

"I guess I can stop by for a little while. It *is* a lovely dress. It would be a shame leaving it hanging in the closet."

Dakota grinned widely. "It's going to be a blast," she promised me. "You are guaranteed to have fun. Trust me."

The mood lightened and I forgot about trying on my new dress as Dakota told me about all her recent college adventures. She told me how she accidentally touched one of her professors as she handed him a report, and then had a vision of him in bondage.

"It was the most disgusting thing you've ever seen!" She giggled throughout the story.

Afterwards, she began telling me about each member of the Constantin family, preparing me for the big event tomorrow.

Baro was the eldest. He was supposedly a burly man, massive with muscle, but wise beyond his years. He had lived for many lifetimes. And, of course, there was Gabe, whom Dakota mentioned had been previously engaged to Annika. "Don't say his name in front of her," Dakota told me. "She may not seem like it, but she's very torn up about the whole thing."

I nodded, once again feeling guilty for harboring my secret crush.

Next there was Rex, who Dakota warned me wasn't very friendly, despite his handsome exterior. She told me Rex had a sour personality and liked to start fights all the time. I was supposed to steer clear of him, if I could help it.

Then she told me about Cam, who, of course, I already met at school. "Oh, I love Cam!" Dakota exclaimed. "I'm so happy you've become friends with him. He can be a snob at times, but he's a lot of fun, too. Have you met Molly, as well?"

I shook my head. "I've passed her in hallways at Frightwell's, but I've never talked to her."

Truth be told, Molly Constantin frightened me a little. I swore I'd caught her staring daggers at me each time I'd passed her, almost like she carried a personal vendetta. At first, I'd thought I was imagining it, but then I'd noticed her around her friends, smiling and laughing. She was very pretty. She was tall and blonde like Cam, and

when she smiled, it softened her features. I only ever saw her wearing her menacing stare while she was looking at me.

"Molly is a doll, too," Dakota continued. "The whole family is pretty awesome. We're going to have so much fun tomorrow. I can't wait!"

My smile was just an act, but I tried my best to look happy. I hoped she was right. I was determined to stay positive. Everything would be fine. It was just a party, after all.

Later on that night, I heard something tapping against my window. I immediately bolted upright in bed. The silence settled back in, but I didn't move an inch. I listened quietly, trying to determine if I was imagining things. I let out a slow, shaky breath, trying my best to stay quiet.

I heard the tapping noise again.

My body tensed with trepidation. Whoever had been following me yesterday had found me! I wondered if it was a member of my troupe. Had they decided to kill me? It was extreme, but possible.

I burrowed myself in the corner of the wall, holding the sheet up to my eyes. Whenever the moment presented itself, I would pull the sheet over my head for protection. Because sheets were always the best protection against scary things lurking in the middle of the night. I sat there for a while, scared out of my mind. I counted the last few precious seconds I had left while I waited for my window to burst open. But then I heard more noises coming from outside. As I listened closer, I could tell the noises were muffled voices. Distinctly male, muffled voices.

I forced myself to abandon my protective sheet and snuck a peek out of the window. I could hardly believe what I was seeing.

Out on the lawn, it appeared that Gabe was there. And he was fighting with...could it really be? I recognized the curly brown hair and darkly tanned skin easily enough. It was Luca!

I ran downstairs as fast as I could and shoved the front door open.

There, kneeling on my front lawn was Gabe, wearing a murderous expression. And he was holding my ex-fiancé to the ground by his collar.

"Who are you?" Gabe shouted, shaking Luca roughly. "And why are you here?"

"Stop!" I choked as I said the word. I was completely taken aback by the whole situation and I wasn't sure how to stop it. All I knew was I needed to stop it- and quickly- before Gabe actually did some damage to Luca.

Gabe looked up from where he was kneeling. His expression seemed to soften when he noticed me.

"Lola, go back inside. There was an intruder, but I'm handling it."

I shook my head fiercely. "I know him. He's from my troupe."

Gabe appeared confused for a moment. "He tried to break in through your window," he pointed out.

"He was probably only trying to talk to me. I'm sure Luca doesn't mean me any harm. He and I...we used to be...betrothed."

The shock of what I'd said loosened Gabe's hold on Luca's collar long enough to allow him the ability to jump up from where Gabe had been holding him down.

Luca ran to me, hugging me tightly. "Lo," he breathed. "I knew you would be here."

It pulled away from him, inspecting his features. He seemed so. . .relieved. "You're not mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad? I know you did what you did because you didn't want to be sold to Madam Wilda."

"That was part of it," I admitted.

He smiled longingly at me, placing his dark hands over mine. "We can be together now."

The impact of what Luca said took a few moments to sink in. *Oh no*, I thought, shaking my head in shame. This was awful. I never thought for a moment that Luca would chase me down with the idea that I would still want to be with him.

Maybe I should have seen this coming. Luca had always been too arrogant for his own good. And though I despised him for his arrogance, deep down, Luca possessed good qualities. I had always cared for him, but like a brother.

Now I had to hurt him, too. The words stayed rooted on my lips, unable to be voiced aloud. How could I tell him that I didn't want to be with him when it would probably break his heart?

It turned out I didn't have to. He could read it all in my expression.

"This was never about being with me, was it?" he asked, slowly stepping backwards. "You only left to get away from him."

I knew by "him" he meant my father. I confirmed his statement by nodding.

"But. . .how could you do that to him if this wasn't about you and me?"

"I'm sorry," was all I managed to say.

His dark eyes filled with a growing revulsion. "I had thought this was about love. I never would have imagined this was purely about your own selfishness."

His harsh words made me flinch. It was true. Love could be forgiven by the gypsy people. But defiance for defiance's sake alone would not be.

Luca seemed completely disgusted with me. He only reaffirmed this by saying, "You're despicable, Lola. Your father is in prison because you're a despicable little bitch."

"Enough!" Gabe growled from behind Luca. I'd forgotten he was standing there. And now, I was even more ashamed because of everything he must have heard. "You won't speak to her that way. In fact, you won't speak to her at all. Leave. *Now*."

The sound of the door screeching open caught my attention. Miriam popped her head outside of it. A sleeping mask pulled up across her forehead, it was obvious the noise must have woken her. "What is going on here? Gabriel, is that you?"

Great, I thought. Let's make things even worse.

And then Annika appeared, stepping out from behind Miriam. "Gabe? What are you doing here?"

Apparently, it could get worse.

I shut my eyes, hoping everyone would disappear. But it didn't work. They were still standing there when I opened them again. I wasn't going to be able to escape this time.

"I was trying to sleep," Gabe told them. "But then I noticed this little fool attempting to break into your granddaughter's window." He gestured towards Luca.

"Grams, everything is okay now," I said, trying to reassure her.

"You were watching the house," Annika acknowledged in a tight voice. She seemed to be making a statement, rather than asking a question.

Miriam didn't let Gabe respond to Annika. She cut in by asking loudly, "Well, what does he want?"

"He's from my troupe," I said. "He just wanted to talk to me." My eyes darted towards Luca again, pleading with him not to say anything else. I couldn't help but feel cut by the anguish he harbored while he looked upon me. It dug into me deeply, making my breath grow short and laborious. I breathed in, trying to hold back any tears

that might spill. I knew I would have to face the sting of my betrayal eventually. I just hoped it wouldn't feel this awful.

"And now he is leaving," Gabe added forcefully. "He's done all the talking he gets to do tonight."

"Watch yourself," Luca warned Gabe as he took a step towards him. I knew Luca must resent that Gabe was trying to bully him, because next to my father, Luca was used to being in charge. But Gabe was built larger, stronger. And he had Luca pinned to the ground only a few moments ago. I was confident Luca wouldn't start another fight. Especially not for me, now that he knew my reasons for leaving didn't involve him.

Luca spat on the ground before me as he turned to leave. I spotted a random car parked across the street he headed towards.

"Lo, are you all right?" Miriam asked groggily.

"I'm fine," I said as evenly as I could manage. I swallowed back any tears that were on the verge of falling and pulled myself together. A few moments passed before I noticed Gabe was staring at me very intently.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked quietly, so that only I could hear him.

"Pshh." I rolled my eyes in Luca's direction and shrugged. I tried my best to act like it was no big deal. "He doesn't bother me."

He continued to watch me, like he was waiting for me to say more. I don't think he believed me for a second. So I walked away.

"Thanks for looking out." I managed a yawn, like I had no cares whatsoever. I ambled up the porch steps as Annika slowly came down

them. As I went inside, I heard her ask Gabe if she could speak with him. I looked back, seeing his eyes still followed me. He nodded in answer to her request.

Miriam shut the door behind us.

"Well, that was eventful," she commented dryly.

"Hopefully that's the last of it," I said. "Sorry to wake you."

"It's okay." She leaned over to kiss the top of my head. "Good night, little girl. Just shout for me if you have anymore trouble."

"I will," I promised.

When I made it back to my room and shut the door behind me, I sat on my bed, sort of lifeless. A part of me wanted to cry, but I didn't let myself. I knew there would be consequences for leaving. I knew the same people I considered my family might grow to hate me. And if they didn't hate me, they would resent me. Somehow, I needed to learn to accept what I'd done. The decision to hurt the ones I loved was the choice I had to make in order to live a life where I would actually have choices.

ELEVEN

The next morning I awakened to the sounds of someone rummaging through my belongings. I opened my eyes, finding Dakota's coppery head standing in the doorway of the closet, flipping through my scanty wardrobe. I could smell the soft scent of peony and I noticed her hair was wet from a recent shower.

"Hey, doll." She smiled at me. "It's about time you finally woke up. The festival already started."

I groaned. I really didn't feel like getting up.

"Tough night?" Dakota asked me. "I heard one of the members of your troupe was here. Was he the guitar player?"

I nodded, a little sadly. I realized she must have known Luca through the images of my troupe performing that came to her when she touched me.

"No worries. It's a new day and we'll take your mind off of it.

Look-- I brought you some iced coffee and I even picked out an outfit for you."

I looked to my right, seeing a mug of coffee sitting there and I picked it up, appreciative for the caffeine. I still felt like I needed to sleep for ten more hours.

Sitting up, I noticed a skirt and blouse had been laid out on the bed. "These should do."

Through the quiet of my bedroom, the sounds of people and music streamed in from a distance.

"How many people are coming to this thing?" I asked Dakota.

"A *lot*," she said. "That's why this whole town talks about it. It provides an otherwise quiet place with a little bit of excitement."

Knowing Dakota was waiting on me, I hurried to shower and dress. I didn't even bother putting contacts in; instead, I quickly put on my usual frames. Dakota had picked out a short-sleeved lavender cardigan, pairing it with a white tank top and a matching white cotton skirt. Both the tank top and the skirt had lacy hems. The outfit was feminine and yet perfectly Floridian, the fabrics light enough to feel breezes through. My hair was still wet when we left, but it was a windy day, so I figured it would dry quickly in the sunshine.

There were tons of people out on the beach. Some were swimming. Some were playing volleyball. And many were simply walking along the pier, drinking beer and laughing. Crowds were everywhere.

Dakota and I walked along the beach towards the Constantins' house. Which, even though it was the nearest house to ours, still took about fifteen minutes to reach by foot.

The house was massive. Sort of palace-like in stature. They had one of those round driveways and there was already a line of cars pulling in, unloading at the front entrance. A valet staff was on duty, taking the cars to the garages for the guests.

"This feels like a hotel," I mentioned to Dakota.

She agreed, adding, "Miriam's tiny beach house looks out of place sitting next to it."

I nodded, having thought the same thing.

When we entered, we had to give our names to the doorman and he directed us to the backyard. We walked through the grand foyer, my jaw dropping in awe. A large dome ceiling encompassed us as we walked in. We were led to a double staircase that curved into separate wings of the house. Underneath the staircase was the pathway to the veranda, which led out into the courtyard. The entire house seemed to have a Spanish-Mediterranean feel to it. The colors echoed the sea and the sky, with a mixture of turquoises, warm oranges and yellows painted along the walls, with warm terra cotta tiles. There were beautiful mosaic designs on the walls and the floors, mimicking the style of the Spanish Renaissance.

It might have been the nicest house I'd ever seen. Lina had danced for an Arabic prince once before and everyone in the troupe had been able to visit the prince's palace for the event. As extravagant as his home had been, I actually preferred this house to that palace.

We made our way into the courtyard, which the house wrapped around on three sides. There were several guests in this area, most likely because there were buffet tables and bars scattered about in different sections. Dakota and I decided to help ourselves to a plate of hors d'oeuvres while we looked around.

"This is crazy," I said to Dakota, still awestruck. Curiously, I asked, "Hey, where is Miriam?"

After popping a stuffed mushroom in her mouth, Dakota said between mouthfuls, "I think she went into town to run some errands. She usually only attends the formal dance."

"Huh. I'm surprised," I said. "You would think this kind of thing would be right up her alley."

"If you think this is good, wait until you see it tonight. Their firework show is spectacular."

We left the courtyard to go out into the backyard, where the carnival rides were located. A small petting zoo was set up there, along with bounce houses, game booths, performers, magicians, jugglers, and the list went on and on. I think my jaw stayed in its dropped position the entire time I was there.

Dakota eventually found some of her old high school friends and introduced me to all of them. While she was caught up in the rapture of conversation, I continued to look around quietly.

It took me by surprise when I felt a pair of hands cover my eyes. In a whisper near my ear, I heard, "Guess who, fellow abandoner?"

I smiled as I turned out of his grasp. "Cam," I replied, laughing. Once facing him, I said, "So I had no idea you lived like such a commoner. Really, your house was much smaller on the inside than I imagined."

Cam chuckled. "What? It's not up to your usual RV accommodations?"

"Mmm. . .not quite." I smiled.

"Have you seen the pool?" he asked.

I shook my head in the negative.

"Come on, I'll show you it then. Maybe it will change your mind."

I motioned to Dakota, who had just caught my eye, that I would be right back. Then I followed Cam towards the pool. He led me to a bright blue oval, where a rocky, man-made waterfall overflowed into the sparkling water.

"Would you like something to drink?" Cam asked politely. A server passed by with refreshments, who Cam signaled over to us.

"Sure," I said, looking up at the tray. "Water is fine."

The server handed me a bottle and Cam tipped the man before he ambled away.

"Thank you."

"No problem," he replied. "So, have you seen anyone from school yet?" he asked, attempting to start conversation.

"No, not yet. Did you?"

"I only ran into a few Frightwell students. But I'm sure more will turn up tonight."

I cracked open my bottle of water as he spoke.

"Are you coming tonight?" he asked me.

I nodded, gulping the water. "Dakota bought me a dress so I kinda have to."

He raised a brow before I realized my blunder. "Not that I wouldn't want to, anyway-- of course! I hear your family throws one heck of a party."

Cam laughed quietly. "It's okay. I'm not usually one for formals, either. And to be honest, Molly does all of the party

planning. She's the one who has the talent for it. "He gestured outwardly now. "All of this was because of her."

"Wow," I said. "And to think she is only a senior in high school."

"Impressive, right? I told her by her twentieth birthday, she'll probably be planning presidential inaugurations and the Academy Awards. Hey, have you met Molly yet?"

"No, I haven't had the chance."

"That's her over there." He pointed to the small, wiry girl I recognized from school. "Come on, I'll introduce you. She gets along with your cousins really well, so I'm sure she has been dying to meet you, too."

I quietly groaned as Cam pulled me alongside him towards his sister. Molly was standing a few yards away, holding a small, bichon frise puppy in her hands as she spoke to the group of people surrounding her.

"Hey, Moll," Cam called to her. "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

Molly politely pardoned herself from her guests. She was very pretty in a delicate sort of way. Petite, blonde and fair. A classic beauty. I noticed she resembled Cam more closely than she did Gabe.

I almost kicked myself. I couldn't go an entire day without thinking of him. Although, I suppose I could excuse myself for today since I was attending his family's party. Thoughts of Gabe were bound to enter my mind sooner or later.

"This is Lola, Miriam's granddaughter. You may have seen her at school."

Molly moved the puppy to one arm and extended her other hand to me. "Delighted to meet you, Lola."

I shook her hand hesitantly. I couldn't explain why, but her overtly saccharine smile seemed insincere.

I tried to brush it off. I was probably making much ado over nothing, but I just couldn't shake the feeling that this girl secretly despised me.

"Cute dog," I commented, trying to ease whatever tension I was feeling.

"Thank you," she replied sweetly. "She is my new puppy. I've named her Pooky. It's silly, but it fits, don't you think?"

"Sure," I said, nodding. "She looks like a Pooky, I guess."

Molly eyed me up and down. Or did I just imagine that?

I fidgeted nervously and pushed my lenses closer to my eyes.

"Damn," Cam suddenly said. "I forgot the band is supposed to arrive now. It's time to start setting up in the ballroom and I'm supposed to go meet with them. Moll, can you take care of Lola? Show her around and stuff?"

"Of course, I can," Molly assured him. "Go on. I want tonight's party to go off without a hitch."

Cam gave me an apologetic smile before rushing off. I watched as he ran back to the house, wishing I could have gone with him.

"So do you like animals, Lola?"

I turned back to Molly now, a little unsettled at the prospect of being left alone with her. I would have rather been simply left alone.

"Yes," I replied.

"We practically have a whole zoo full of them here today. My favorites are the little billy goats." She pointed towards a fenced off area where children were being allowed to pet and feed different farm animals. "They're cute, aren't they?"

I nodded. "Yeah, they're real cute."

"So what's your favorite animal?" she asked me. The conversation seemed a little immature, though I answered her, anyway.

"Um, I never really thought about it before. But if I had to choose a favorite-- I guess maybe the panda bear."

Molly opened her mouth and then covered it with her hand. "That's wonderful!" she exclaimed, with a newly developed enthusiasm. "We had a panda shipped in for this year's festival!"

"Really?" I asked, actually surprised. I was almost positive even the Tampa Zoo didn't have pandas on display.

"Yeah, we really do!" She pointed towards the backside of the house. "It's just through that gate over there. You should definitely go check him out. He is totally adorable!"

"I will," I said. Her excitement was beginning to rub off on me.

"I'll go right now. Thanks for telling me."

"No problem." She laid her big smile on thick again. I was starting to feel a little ashamed for judging her. Maybe she was only

trying to be nice. Besides, if Dakota and Annika were friends with her, than Molly was probably all right.

I walked quickly to where she had directed me, almost in anticipation. I really did adore panda bears. They were sort of cuddly and I liked watching them eat their bamboo.

The gate I walked through shut behind me with a resounding click. Jolted by the noise, I turned, realizing it couldn't be re-opened. I wondered why they would put one of the animals on display here, where you couldn't re-enter the backyard.

It didn't take me long before I realized I had been tricked. I looked around the side of the house, my mouth parting from the shock of it.

There was no panda. There was nothing but a few patches of grass and some scattered palm trees.

"What a little beast," I muttered to no one in particular while I turned about, searching for another entrance. But there wasn't another way in. I'd have to go all the way to the front of the house and back through the main entrance again.

I started walking, simply because I had no other choice. I was practically stomping as I walked; the whole time wondering what I had done to gain the only female Constantin's hatred. I had never even spoken to the girl before today, let alone had the opportunity to piss her off. Even though Gabe was frequently rude to me, he'd still had the decency to show me a little kindness. And I was pretty sure he would never do anything so low as this.

I didn't get it. All I knew was if I came face to face with Molly Constantin, I might have to smack her stupid smile right off of her face.

TWELVE

Instead of going back to the party, I decided to go home and defuse my temper by taking a nice, long bubble bath. I picked out chamomile aromatherapy oil that said it was meant to 'de-stress and calın.' I poured the entire bottle in the bathtub, just for good measure.

Later, just as I was getting out of the tub and had tied my robe on, Dakota came bustling into the room.

"Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you."

I considered telling her the truth, really wanting her opinion about why Molly would want me to leave the party. But I decided against it. I had only just calmed down and I didn't want to relive my anger.

"I'm sorry," I finally said. "I wasn't feeling well."

The lie didn't feel right on my lips and it was obvious Dakota doubted me from the look of her skeptical expression.

"It's fine," she said. "But you're coming to the party tonight. And this time you're staying for more than five minutes."

I gave her a little salute. "I'll be there."

She smiled and then breathed in through her nose. "It smells good in here, by the way. Like chamomile."

When it was nearing evening, the whole house seemed to be full of curlers, makeup, hairspray, perfume and other girly things. I felt like we were all getting ready for a grand ball in some kind of fairy tale.

Dakota offered to do my hair for me, but I refused. I couldn't take the risk of her touching me again. I tried to do it myself, but because it was so long and thick, my handiwork ended up looking like a catastrophe. Thankfully, Miriam walked in on me, mid-catastrophe, and clicked her tongue. "Oh no, little girl. Here, give me the brush."

Miriam chose to pull my hair back and then she pinned it up into a fancy bun. I smiled, impressed.

"Thanks, Grams."

It was nice, the aura of femininity. I never had much experience with it while traveling with my father. Now that I thought about it, I wondered how Lina always managed to look so gorgeous on stage. My Auntie Zetta would often help by sewing Lina's costumes, but apart from that, Lina did everything else on her own without any female guidance.

Since I was ready and dressed before anyone else, I decided to put on a pot of coffee. Afterwards, I peeked into Miriam's room and I saw her sitting at her vanity, curlers in her hair.

"Come in," she called out.

"I just wanted to know if you cared for some coffee." I slowly walked into her bedroom. She glanced up at my reflection through her mirror.

"Well, look at you!" she exclaimed, whistling. She turned from her vanity and then looked me over from head to toe.

"You look beautiful, Lo. That dress is simply stunning."

"Thank you." I smiled. "Dakota bought it for me."

Miriam tilted her head. "Well, she always had good taste." She winked at me. She began to pull the rollers from her hair, one by one, letting the short mahogany curls spring free. "And yeah, I could use a mug of coffee. I'm sure it will be a long night. No sugar and fat free milk."

I nodded. "Be right back."

While preparing Miriam's coffee, (which didn't even look drinkable due to its lack of real cream and sugar), Annika walked into the kitchen.

"Hey, Anni," I greeted her.

"Hello," she said. She wore a daring black dress, the décolletage practically cut to her stomach.

"Wow," I said. "You look amazing."

"Thanks," she replied, drumming her fingers against the counter top.

"Do you want some coffee?"

"No." She moved towards the wine rack. "Coffee just isn't going to do the trick tonight." She removed a bottle of merlot from its slot. "This is what I need."

She smiled. It was almost a wicked smile, in a way. I wondered if something was wrong with her. The memory of last night flashed through my mind and I remembered she had left the house to speak

with Gabe just as I had come inside. I thought maybe their conversation was the cause of her strange mood. It seemed reasonable, considering she hadn't seen Gabe since their break-up.

I watched as Annika slowly poured the dark red wine into a glass. She held the glass up, gesturing a toast. "To you," she said, before taking a drink.

I tried to laugh, but it came out awkwardly. "Okay, then. Um, cheers to me."

She downed the entire glass before refilling it with more wine. I quickly left the kitchen to bring Miriam her coffee, wondering what the deal was with Annika's bizarre antics.

By the time Dakota and Miriam were, almost ready to leave, I found myself alone with Annika in the kitchen again, waiting.

She sat there in a daze, circling the top of her wine glass with her fingers. I silently sat across from her on a stool at the island.

Every now and then, I caught Annika staring at me. Her gaze seemed.

. almost menacing. I don't know, maybe I was imagining it. Then again, I had also thought the same thing about Molly- and *that* suspicion had proven to be right.

But this was Annika. Sweet, docile *Annika*. It just wasn't like her.

"You know, I had a dream about you," Annika mentioned.

"Really?"

"Well, it was really more of a nightmare, I suppose."

I held my breath, waiting for her continue. A lull had grown in the room and Annika seemed to be staring into space, her eyes blank of any emotion. When she didn't say anything, I impatiently asked, "So, what happened in the dream?"

She turned her attention back towards me. "You were abducted." She said the words without any feeling or emotion. Her expression remained blasé even as I let out a little gasp.

"Don't worry," she said. "Your true love will search for you. He proclaimed he would not rest until he found you."

Startled, I asked, "Anni, is this one of those dreams that comes true? Do you ever just have regular dreams?"

She stared at me intently for a moment, as if she were looking right through me, lost in her own little world. And then she suddenly came to, smiling widely. "It was just a dream, Lola. Not a premonition."

A chilling tremor ran through me, enveloping me in coldness.

Did she mean what she said?

I forced myself to brush the terrifying feeling away. She couldn't possibly mean it. I didn't even have a *true love*.

"Anni, can you start the car up?" Miriam shouted from upstairs. "I don't care if the Constantins' house *is* next door. I'm not walking in heels."

"Sure thing," Annika replied and stood up from her seat. She moved towards the sink. I assumed she was taking her wine glass there to be left for the wash.

Everything seemed to happen right at once.

Annika suddenly lost her footing and tripped directly in front of me. The contents of her glass flung at my chest, splashing across the front of my silver gown.

"Oh, my dear," Annika said. "I'm so sorry."

My jaw was left hanging open in shock.

The stain slowly expanded as it settled into the silky fabric. It was a vibrant contrast against the sliver- a bright crimson red.

Miriam and Dakota both appeared in the doorway of the kitchen at the same time. Both of their expressions seemed to match my own: completely horrified.

"What happened?" Miriam asked.

"I'm afraid I tripped," Annika said innocently. "It was an accident." Her voice didn't seem to hold any real remorse. In fact, she stayed even-toned.

Dakota's eyes seemed to sparkle with anger as she glared at her sister. "Her dress is *ruined*, Anni."

As soon as I got a hold of myself, I grabbed a towel to wipe the residue from my chest and face.

"I said it was an accident, Kota," Annika snapped back.

Miriam began to soak a towel in some hot water with soap. She stood before me, lifted my dress and began scrubbing.

"It's no use," I pointed out the obvious. "It's red wine. I don't think it will come clean." Miriam stopped scrubbing and looked up at me. Her brown eyes scanned the length of the stain.

"You're right. There's no way it will lift."

I sighed softly. "You all should leave now. You'll be late for the party. I didn't really feel like going, anyway."

"Are you sure you're okay with that?" Annika asked.

"Anni!" Dakota hissed. "We are not just leaving her here."

"Really, it's fine," I said.

Dakota appeared to be torn. She was looking forward to this party and I really didn't want to ruin her night just because I could no longer go.

On the other hand, Annika just stood there with her arms crossed, staring outside the window, as if she were bored.

"Go on, you two," Miriam ordered. "I'll take care of Lola. Both of you go on ahead."

"I'll go get the car," Annika informed everyone. Then she left the house, without a backwards glance.

Dakota stayed behind. "I just feel so horrible," she said. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Of course. Now *go*." I smiled brightly, hoping it would put her at ease. She eventually left, although reluctantly.

I turned back to Miriam. "You too," I told her. "I'm not ruining your night, either."

"You won't," she promised me. "As long as you can change quickly enough."

I angled a brow, like she was speaking madness. "Into what, exactly? A t-shirt and shorts?"

"Come with me." She left the kitchen abruptly and headed up the stairs. I followed her curiously.

Miriam opened a storage closet in the hallway and began rifling through the clothes inside. It appeared to be mostly winter wear, which I was sure were rarely used. She eventually found what she was looking for, pulling a garment bag loose from where it had been hanging.

She then made her way into the guest bathroom, turning the shower on full heat.

"It will probably need to be steamed," she explained.

Finally, Miriam unzipped the bag and pulled out one of the loveliest gowns I had ever seen.

It was old Hollywood glamour, classic and beautiful.

"It was your mother's," she told me. "They matched her eyes perfectly. Since yours are the same color, I'm sure it will do the same for you."

I nodded in awe. The blue of the gown was the exact color of a deep blue sapphire.

"It's lovely, Grams," I said. "It looks like it could have been bought in a store yesterday."

Miriam steamed and pressed the gown for me. When she finished, I removed my stained gown and quickly changed. My mother's dress was cut in a mermaid style. In a ruched material, it wrapped from the top of my bust down to my mid-thigh in one-inch sections. The material slightly loosened at the thigh, creating a pretty silhouette, which draped to my feet. The material clung closely to me. I realized it must have meant that my mother had the same shape. As I

mused over this, Miriam entered the room from behind. "She was slightly shorter than you, but apart from that, about the same size."

"She had great taste," I mentioned.

Miriam held out the silver high heels I had been wearing earlier. And then she handed me a long, silver beaded necklace that sparkled in the light. "The necklace is mine. It should help the shoes to match."

"Thanks, Grams. It's perfect." But my smile faded as I thought of Annika.

"Annika doesn't want me to go tonight, does she?"

Miriam's lips tightened into a straight line. She didn't seem prepared to answer my question.

"I'll talk to her," she said, then turned to leave. "Let's skidaddle. We're late enough as it is. I don't want to miss the baconwrapped scallops."

"Why?"

"Because they're absolutely scrumptious."

I crossed my arms, stubbornly. "Why doesn't she want me to go?" I held her gaze, determined to get an answer out of her. Her shoulders drooped. I knew she finally caved when I heard her long sigh.

"I think she might be jealous of you."

"Jealous?" I asked, incredulous. "Why on earth would she be jealous?"

"Think about it," Miriam suggested. "Her ex-fiancé showed up last night to save you like you were some damsel in distress."

I paused for a moment, confused. "But I was the damsel in distress. At least it looked that way to him," I pointed out. "Gabe was only being. . .nice."

"She may not see it that way."

"Well, that's ridiculous. Gabe is almost a decade older than me."

Miriam shrugged. "Girls often behave moronically when they're in love."

I considered that. "Yeah, I suppose," I agreed. In truth, I wouldn't know because I'd never been in love. At least- I *think* I never had. I suddenly found myself wondering if I'd ever fallen in love in a previous life.

"Come on," she said. "Try not to think about it. Annika will get over it, no matter the reason she's decided not to like you. Though she certainly didn't act like it tonight, she isn't a horrible person."

"You're right," I conceded. "And soon enough, she'll see I don't want to steal Gabe from her."

As we walked outside, I found myself questioning if that last statement was entirely true.

THIRTEEN

"Wow. Your boobs look great in that dress!"

I immediately flinched. Dakota's voice was just an octave higher than I would have liked it to be, resulting in several nearby people turning their heads in my direction. No doubt, everyone was debating for themselves if my boobs really did look as good as she claimed.

"You don't come with a filter, do you?" I asked, attempting to laugh the comment off and smiling for good show- even though I really just wanted to beat Dakota to death. This feeling increased more and more with each pair of eyes I noticed staring at my chest.

"Nope, sorry, I don't come with one of those. By the way, doll, I have to say I may like this blue dress better than the silver."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm surprised Miriam kept it tucked away all these years. I wonder what else the old woman has hidden. I think I may snoop through her closets tomorrow."

I chuckled at that, this time genuinely amused. Miriam was full of surprises, it seemed. My eyes searched the room for my grandmother. I found her standing not too far away, laughing and telling a story in the midst of a crowd of older people. She looked stunning in her black, vintage ballroom gown. As usual, she continued to defy her age completely.

I scanned the ballroom in awe. It was exactly what I'd always imagined one might look like. . . There were giant, glittering chandeliers. Twinkle lights. A massive, marble dance floor. It was like a scene out of a movie. A scene in which I'd never imagined myself playing a part in.

"Champagne?" Dakota asked me as she offered a flute.
"Knowing the Constantins, it's probably the best."

"Sure, thank you. Cheers."

Our glasses clinked as they touched. "To a night to remember," Dakota toasted before we sipped.

"It's good," I said after letting the flavor linger on my tongue.

Dakota shrugged. "I wouldn't know," she told me. "I'm not much of a connoisseur. I'm used to dorm room keg parties."

"Well, you're not dressed for a keg party tonight. Did I mention how lovely you look? You remind me of a fairy princess."

"Thanks, doll." She smiled. My compliment was no exaggeration. Dakota was wearing a bright pink chiffon dress, which glittered in the light. The color was daring and stood out in the crowd, but it was also flattering, feminine and completely Dakota's style.

As I looked around some more, I spotted Cam near the buffet tables. I excused myself from Dakota so I could go over there and greet him.

On the way, I happened to pick up pieces of random conversations. One of them caught my attention as soon as I heard who was being talked about.

"Have you seen Gabe tonight?" A blonde girl asked her friend.

"Yes, I did. He looks absolutely gorgeous."

"I agree. Gorgeous-- and newly single."

"Shut up! I thought he was engaged?"

"Nope. He broke it off with that Annika girl."

"Omigod, I bet she's devastated."

"I certainly would be."

A short pause passed between the friends before one of them suggested, "What do you say we make our rounds? Now that Gabe is single, I think I'll ask him to dance with me."

"Not if I ask him first."

I shook my head. *Stupid, shameless girls*, I thought. I had a strange yearning to trip both of them as they walked past me.

And then I shook my head at myself. Who was I kidding? I was the stupid one.

I really needed to curb these bizarre, irrational thoughts. They were starting to freak me out a little bit and I was afraid that one day I might possibly act on them.

Gabe is not yours, I tried reminding myself. Don't know where you ever got that idea from, but get it out of your head right now!

There's a lot of wine going around here tonight and Annika is somewhere in this room. You don't want her to ruin your mother's dress, too, do you?

Eventually, I realized I was standing in the middle of the ballroom talking to myself. But thankfully, not aloud. I quickly continued on to the buffet tables before anyone noticed how crazy I

was behaving. When I finally reached Cam, I placed my hands over his eyes as he had done to me earlier.

"Guess," I said to him.

"Could it be the loveliest girl here, wearing that gorgeous blue gown?"

I released my hold on him and grinned. "Good guess. And thank you for the indirect compliments."

Cam turned to face me. "So where did you run off to earlier? I looked for you everywhere, but couldn't find you. Molly said she thought you went home."

"Did she?" I asked casually. "Well, she was right. I did go home. I had a. . .stomach ache. I think I may have ate too many of those hors d'oeuvres."

He eyed me with concern. "Are you okay now?"

"Yep." I smiled. "I'm feeling much better."

"Well, in that case, care to dance?" Cam offered.

I shook my head warily. "I'm not much of a dancer."

He raised a disbelieving brow. "You're telling me you're a Moori gypsy and you don't know how to dance?"

"First of all, I've never danced on stage before. I was never allowed to perform with the troupe. Second of all, I only know some belly dance, because Lina liked company when she practiced," I explained. "But even so, it's definitely not the same as ballroom dancing. I'm not up for making a fool out of myself in public."

Cam stared at me strangely. After a moment, he offered, "Should I ask the band to play something Arabic?"

I chuckled. "Not on your life. But thanks, anyway."

"Are you sure? I don't believe I've seen a live belly dance performance. In this life, anyway. They may even know a Shakira song."

"Now you're making fun."

"Not at all," he told me sincerely. "It is something I would *definitely* be interested in watching."

"I'll bet," I mumbled.

"So who was this famous belly dancer friend of yours? She was in your tribe?"

"My troupe," I corrected him. "We are a small group of traveling performers. I'm not sure you would consider us large enough to be a tribe. And my friend's name is Lina Drynski. You can You Tube her and probably find her online. She's well-known throughout Europe and the Middle East."

"Amazing," he said.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"That you wanted to leave. You seemed to have the life we all dream of."

I could see that he would think of my life that way, especially while Cam's family had opted for a more stationary way of living.

"I had my reasons," I said, not really caring to delve into it any more than that. Thankfully, I didn't have to because one of Cam's friends from Frightwell and Black's approached us.

They exchanged the American slap hug I noticed only men seemed to do with other men. Less touching involved, I supposed.

"How's it going, bro? The party is awesome, as usual."

"Thanks, Drew. Glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't dream of missing it," he said. And then he turned his attention to me. "So, are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Cam smiled. "Ah, of course. Lola, meet Drew Baskerfield.

Drew, meet Lola Moori. I'm surprised you two never ran into each other at school."

Drew was tall with brown hair and an athletic build. I suppose he was attractive, in a nondescript kind of way.

"So this is the new girl everyone is talking about?"

Cam nodded. "This would be her."

I shook Drew's hand as he offered it to me. "And just what are people saying?" I asked pointedly.

Drew grinned, a little devilishly. "That you're the most beautiful girl here tonight. And I definitely have to agree."

I didn't blush, thankfully. But I was certainly surprised by Drew's forwardness and I momentarily lost my train of thought.

Cam chuckled. "Now look what you did. She's lost her voice."

"I sometimes have the tendency to that to beautiful women."

I nearly choked on that line. "Cam, are all of your friends so--"

"Smooth?" Drew offered for me, stepping closer.

I took a step backwards. "I was going to say cocky."

He shook his head. "No, I'm sure that can't be the right word."

I had to smile. As smug as this Drew kid seemed to be, he was rather amusing.

"Dance with me?" Drew held out his hand as if I would automatically let him sweep me across the dance floor.

"No, thanks."

Cam chimed in with, "Don't look so bent out of shape, bro. She wouldn't say yes to me, either. And I haven't spent the last few minutes feeding her those so called 'smooth' lines."

Drew dramatically placed a hand over his chest, pouting. "You've broken my heart."

"I'm positive it will heal all the same," I assured him very sweetly.

"Course it will," a new voice said from behind Drew and I froze.

Gabe stepped around Drew, standing between us. I held my breath.

"Lola is a neighbor and a friend, which means off limits to you, Baskerfield."

He really was as handsome as I'd heard those girls say earlier.

Dressed for the occasion, Gabe was very striking in his black tux with his hair combed back. It took me nearly a whole minute before I remembered how to breathe again.

Drew didn't take offense to Gabe's comment. Instead, he grinned and said, "What's up, policeman?"

Gabe didn't return Drew's grin. He only asked, "Cam still hasn't learned to steer clear of you yet?"

"Nope. Not yet."

"I keep telling him that his friends are supposed to be good influences."

"Ah, but where's the fun in that?"

Cam rolled his eyes and pushed Drew by the back of his arm, leading him away. "Come on, Drew. I don't think my brother wants to speak to either one of us."

"Okay, fine. I get the hint." Before they walked away, Drew turned his head around and winked at me. "Hope to catch up with you later, Lola."

"Um. Yeah. Sure," I offered awkwardly.

It took me a moment for it to completely sink in that I had been left alone with Gabe. I wondered why Cam felt it was necessary to do so. This whole situation was extremely uncomfortable and I was more than a little embarrassed. Had Gabe made it clear to his brother he wanted to speak with me?

"I'm glad you came. I wanted to make sure you were okay," Gabe explained. "You know, after what happened last night."

I almost sighed in relief. So Gabe never intended this to look like he wanted to speak with me just for the sole purpose of speaking with me- because that would be weird, obviously. And then everyone would suspect that I was into Gabe. And then they may suspect that Gabe was into me, which would be even weirder considering the age difference.

Nope, this was just polite conversation.

"I'm fine," I breathed, smiling. I'm crazy, irrational and I overanalyze every little thing about you, but I'm fine.

"I hope so," he told me. There was a sweet sincerity in his voice. "I just figured I would check up on you and make sure you were all right. I know from personal experience that detachment from one's tribe can be a very difficult thing to go through."

I wondered what Gabe meant by that. I knew he was an abandoner, like me, but I never knew what his family had gone through to become what they were. I desperately wanted to ask him, to know any little details about his life, and the question lingered on the tip of my tongue for a while...but I stopped myself from asking.

Every time I found out something about Gabe, I only wanted to know more and more. It was better just not asking. *Gabe is not yours*, I reminded myself for the millionth time. He just happens to be somewhat considerate of others (when he's not being an arrogant ass). And that is the *only* reason he is checking up on me.

I was disappointed, but I knew there should be boundaries between us. And for Annika's sake, I shouldn't cross them. So I smiled, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice as I said, "Thank you. I appreciate it. But I swear I'm fine. I'm happy with Miriam."

He nodded, solemnly. I wasn't sure if he believed me or not this time. His face was as expressionless as it was that first day I met him on the docks, and he didn't say anything.

"Thank you for inviting me. I hope you have a good night," I said, retreating from the conversation.

"You're welcome, Lola."

There it was again. The way he said my name- it was so damned familiar. I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

Thankfully, I managed to walk away before I said something stupid. Strange thing was, I could feel his eyes boring into my back as I left. Or maybe it was just my imagination, I didn't know.

I didn't look back to find out.

FOURTEEN

I was walking out of the bathroom when I heard them talking.

They were standing in front of the corridor and didn't notice me when I approached.

I stopped in my tracks as soon as I heard my name. Carefully, I moved closer to the wall, attempting to make myself inconspicuous so no one could catch me spying.

"My brother wouldn't tell me anything about her. . .Lo-la. Ugh.

Just her name makes me sick."

It was Molly's voice speaking. Except this time, her voice didn't hold the same ring of insincerity I heard in it before. This time she sounded completely honest.

I guess it didn't surprise me that it was Annika's voice I heard next.

"It's okay, Mol. He told me everything last night."

"What did he say to you?"

Annika sighed. "Long story. But to sum it up really prettily, it doesn't have a happy ending for Gabe and me."

I peeked around the corner. I could only view Molly's features from where I was standing. And her eyes were slit as if she were seething.

"Who does she think she is, anyway, coming here and screwing everything up? I was supposed to be your bridesmaid, for crying out loud." Pouting, she added, "I had your entire wedding planned out."

"She doesn't know, supposedly."

Molly choked on her champagne. Coughing, she asked, "What do you mean she doesn't *know*?"

"Apparently she doesn't have her memories."

Molly's eyes widened, and her brow furrowed subsequently. "Oh, what a load of crap. I don't believe that for a second. And even if it was true- and that's a really big *if*, she still just can't show up and start causing trouble for you."

"I agree, but there's nothing I can do about it now."

Molly twirled a curl of blonde hair in her fingers as she scanned the ballroom. "Where is she, anyway? Maybe I can have security toss her out on her ass." Molly giggled, amused by her own suggestion. "I'd have to do it while no one is looking, of course."

"No, don't," Annika said. "It's not worth it and my grandmother would know. Not that I really care what Miriam thinks right now. I know she's been lying to me this whole time."

"Why do you think so?"

Annika shook her head. "I just have this feeling. And my feelings are never usually wrong."

Molly smoothed Annika's hair. "I'm sorry, Anni. My brother is a dumb jerk for breaking your heart."

I couldn't tell, but I think Annika smiled at Molly's comment.

"And if it makes you feel better," Molly continued, "I don't know what Gabe sees in that girl, anyway. Did you know she's of Moori blood? It's disgusting. All *that* family is known for is for thieving and whoring. But they dress it up real nicely by classifying themselves as 'entertainers.'"

My hands balled into tight fists at my sides. A rush of heat warmed my face and neck. After hearing what I'd just heard, I was itching to smash my fist into Molly's bratty little face. Even though I'd never been really good at throwing punches, I figured I could probably do some damage to her if I put my whole body into it. She was tiny, after all. I bet I could even knock her to the ground.

I stomped into the carpet, trying to vent some of my anger. It was taking everything I had in me not to go over there where she stood. It was one thing to talk about me. But how dare she talk about my family that way! Who did she think she was?

Okay, well *some* of it was true. I could admit that to myself. But most of it was way over-exaggerated and entirely uncalled for.

It pissed me off even more when I felt a stinging at my eyes. I couldn't believe I'd let her upset me to this extent. It also bothered me to no end that I didn't understand half of what they were talking about. What did she mean when she said she didn't know what Gabe sees in me? He'd never acted like he was even remotely interested in me before. Okay, so he showed up at Miriam's house last night to rescue me. But how could Molly and Annika think that he had some kind of hidden agenda for doing so? How could they believe there was any other reason beyond the fact that Gabe was just being a nice

guy? Geez, he was just doing the right thing! Anyone who was good and who had the kind of sight Gabe possessed would have done the same. As far as I was concerned, I believed they were looking way too far into it.

But then there were those other things they said. . .about me not knowing and not having my memories.

No one knew that about me. . .so how did they? And out of all people, how on earth would Gabe know that I didn't have my memories? I contemplated on whether or not I'd ever told Miriam before. I didn't think I did, but then again, I didn't remember it ever being brought up.

Zetta knew. My father knew. I was pretty sure they were the *only* people who did. Did either of them ever tell Miriam? My head was starting to hurt from all the confusion.

I decided to look for a server in order to grab another glass of champagne. At least for now, I had my temper under control. I should probably stay away from Molly- and her security guards, for that matter.

I wanted answers to my questions and I really didn't feel like waiting. I thought about approaching Gabe outright, but I didn't know what I would say.

I could just picture myself now, saying something along the lines of, So while I was spying on Molly and Annika, I heard some interesting things and I was wondering if you could explain them. I could almost guarantee that wasn't the best way to get answers.

I supposed I could approach Miriam about it. Annika did mention something about her knowing more than what she'd let onto. But I figured it should probably wait until after the party or maybe even tomorrow. I didn't want to ruin Miriam's fun and at the same time, I felt like I needed a clear head in order to process whatever she could tell me. I was tired of feeling like I didn't know what the hell was going on. I wanted to make sure she would spill whatever she knew.

Eventually, I found a server carrying a champagne tray right as I bumped into Drew Baskerfield. It seemed he was headed for the same tray.

"Hey, there." He smiled at me, making him appear much more handsome. "Did you change your mind about dancing?"

I smiled back, happy to be around his carefree nature for the moment. He was just being nice. And after listening to people talk shit about me behind my back for the last few minutes, it felt really good to know that someone was being genuinely sweet to me. And maybe I'd been too hard on Drew earlier. What would one dance hurt, anyway? It was a party, after all. . .

FIFTEEN

Thankfully, it turned out that I wasn't completely horrible at dancing. I even thought it was kind of fun. "Okay, so you have to follow my lead," Drew had informed me, thinking it was a great responsibility to teach someone to dance for the first time.

"Do you even know what you're doing?" I asked when he accidentally stepped on my foot.

"Ahem." Drew coughed. "I was just making sure you were paying attention to my instructions."

I laughed. Eventually, we picked up the beat and he led me into a waltz. It was really nice. It felt very classic, very regal, just like I'd imagined a dance at a ball would be like. And later on, the band played some modern music and we just decided to go crazy, making up our own dance moves. Between the laughing and the dancing, I was having a blast. And it almost made me forget everything else. I almost forgot about Gabe.

Almost.

Casually, Drew mentioned, "He's going to kill me, you know."
"Who is?"

The band started playing a ballad. He took me by the waist and led me in for a slow dance. Our breathing was still heavy from jumping around during the last song.

"Gabe."

"What, why?"

"Well, for one, he is staring daggers at me right now. I kind of get the feeling that it has something to do with you."

I looked around Drew's head. Sure enough, Gabe stood not far from the dance floor, leaning casually against the wall and staring directly at us. He was surrounded by a group of people. One guy appeared like he was trying to get Gabe's attention, though it was lost on him.

I looked back to Drew, shrugging my shoulders. At the same time, an unexplained feeling of exhilaration crept through my stomach- as if I were delighted by the fact that Gabe was paying so much attention to me.

"I have no idea why he cares who I'm dancing with," I said to Drew. "Maybe he's just lost in thought?"

"Hmm. . .is that why he's headed this way right now?"

I leaned over Drew's shoulder, trying to get a better look. Gabe wasn't leaning against the same wall anymore. I scanned the ballroom, but couldn't find him anywhere in sight.

"Sorry, Baskerfield. Lola promised me her next dance."

I stilled, feeling the reverberations of his deep voice grab me with each word. He'd snuck up on us from behind. Drew appeared flustered with Gabe all but cutting in on him like that. He grumbled as he walked away, but surprisingly didn't contend the issue. He simply left, without even waiting for my own consent to this supposed dance I'd promised Gabe.

I frowned, unhappy with the situation. In fact, I was confused as hell and getting more and more tired of it by the minute. "I most certainly did not promise--"

"Save your arguments, Lola. He's already gone."

And with that said Gabe took hold of my hand and pulled me towards the veranda.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Afraid I'll ruin your shoes with my clumsy feet?"

I wasn't sure why, but I was enormously intrigued. I decided to be honest with Gabe by asking, "Why do you want to dance with me?"

He shrugged. "I happen to enjoy dancing every, now and then. Also, I asked the band to play the next piece. I figured I should show my appreciation."

As soon as he said it, the tune of a piano started to play. Gabe pulled me towards him, placing one of my arms along his shoulder and taking my free hand in his. I felt a small tingle travel down the length of my spine. I had never been this close to him before. Inexplicably, it was almost like there was an electric current within the warmth of his hand.

"That doesn't explain why you asked me," I pointed out. "You could have asked any number of girls."

"You were already dancing, and you looked like you were enjoying it."

I lifted a brow, still very curious about his actions, but he was making it obvious he wasn't going to take my questions seriously.

Without thinking, I asked, "Do you like me?"

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I immediately regretted the question. I figured I could shock him by being blunt. But I ended up only shocking myself.

Gabe only smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Of course I like you, Lola," he answered me.

I swallowed. "You know what I meant."

I was suddenly caught off guard by a harmony within the music being played. It brought on an achingly recognizable impression within me. Like I had instinctively known how the next verse sounded. I halfway closed my eyes, concentrating on the sound. A hidden meaning felt so close, like if I could just reach out and grasp it, I might understand. . .

"The tune of this music sounds so familiar," I mentioned aloud.

"I doubt you know it. It's not a common piece."

"No, I don't think I've heard it before."

Very slowly, he twirled me underneath his arm. His eyes never left mine for a moment.

Those eyes.

It was difficult to understand; it was as if looking into Gabe's eyes was like looking into a million different emotions. There was so much depth, and the darkness of his eyes didn't conceal it.

As the distant melody of the lullaby hummed on, something strange happened.

There was a part of the music that triggered it. In my head, I could hear words being sung aloud, even though there were no words being sung. Suddenly, an image struck me hard.

It was him.

It was. . . Gabe.

I could see him vividly. We were in some sort living room. It was raining outside and I was sprawled across a cushioned window seat, lazily watching water droplets trickle down the length of the windowpanes. And that's when I heard the baritone of his voice. He was singing. For some reason, the sound of his voice made me smile. . .it was because the song was for me. I instinctively knew this.

Turned, I noticed him about two feet away from me, sitting at a pianoforte. His face- his beautiful face didn't hold the grave expression I'd become used to. He was actually smiling. Singing and smiling.

"You look like you just saw a ghost."

Reality. It washed over me quickly as the beautiful dream vanished.

I looked up into Gabe's eyes, noticing his anxious expression. I wondered if he was waiting for me to speak.

"Um, no. . .I just spaced out for a second."

"Oh." His voice seemed tinged with disappointment. Oddly out of place.

As we lingeringly danced around the veranda, I tried to dislodge the hauntingly beautiful dream from my mind. It wouldn't do me any good to create fantasies of Gabe writing songs for me, which was furthest from his persona in any sense.

Yet, he was just too close. He was so close I could breathe in his clean, spicy scent, so strangely alluring. I suppose I never imagined what Gabe would smell like before, but I somehow *knew* the intoxicating scent- his scent.

The tempo of the music picked up and before I knew it, Gabe was twirling me around the veranda.

With each beat I began to hear whispers.

Laughter.

I could hear tears of pain and tears of joy.

The tempo increased as the music neared its climax.

Suddenly there were all these different images, like pictures flashing in front of my eyes. A distant pain seemed to pulsate in my head, like there was something inside of me about to unleash.

There were so many images of him- of Gabe. I could see him smiling, laughing. It didn't make sense. This man never smiled. And he never laughed! A chilling sensation moved down my spine and I could suddenly see Gabe in my arms, his eyes filled with passion.

Quickly, I released my hold from Gabe's arm and forcefully pushed him away from me.

"Lola, are you alright?"

I closed my eyes, willing the images to disappear. It proved to be a bad idea because the images only multiplied with intensity. I suddenly knew what it was like to make love to the man standing before me, when I'd never experienced anything like that in my life! I

was still innocent, in that way. But yet, I knew, I just *knew* what it was like to have Gabe hold me in his arms, while we both trembled from the intensity of our. . .love.

My God, was I in love with Gabe?

Slowly, I backed away from him. This was crazy. It was madness. I barely knew Gabe. Somehow, I must have conjured up these fake memories out of some strange attraction I felt towards him.

But as I watched him watching me, I could see a sort of realization dawn on him. He could see my eyes had grown wide. He could see the disbelief written on my face.

And I could see that he knew something I didn't.

I kept walking backwards until I bumped against the railing.

"You need to breathe, Lo." His voice seemed to be filled with a quiet understanding. I could hear it when he spoke. He knew what was happening. He knew what I was. . .remembering.

"Lo?" he asked painfully.

I winced before I spoke. "Yes?"

"Breathe, okay?"

I nodded dimly. "I keep forgetting."

He started to walk towards me, but I held up my hand in front of me. "Please, just stay where you are."

Gabe respectfully kept his distance. Carefully, I scrutinized him from head to toe. He was the epitome of perfection. He didn't look quite the same as the mental images in my head. Each version was slightly different from each other. But there were so many similarities. He always had dark hair and gray eyes. In some images,

he had longer hair. In others, it was cut short. His jaw was always square and firm. Yet there were slight differences in each face. However, some things remained the same for every version of him.

In every image Gabe's body was usually lean and slightly muscled. In some images, his entire body was bigger, rock-hard, as if his daily routine had forced him into the mass of muscles. And in some of my images, he was built a bit leaner, but never too thin or too out of that same Gabe-like character.

No matter how much I wanted to disbelieve what I had seen in my head, I knew it was him. It was always Gabe.

With that same knowledge, a basic instinct told me that the man standing in front of me held every piece of my heart, my soul. This man could be the end of everything I'd ever believed, everything I'd ever known.

I wanted to say something- anything. But I didn't know where to begin. How could he have loved me and held me like I saw in my mind. . .and let me go on not ever knowing? How could he do that? I could feel to the depths of my being that whatever it was we had shared, it was something momentous. So *how* could he let me go on as if the existence of what we shared was insignificant?

And how could I...

Forget?

It was too much. His eyes implored mine as if he were waiting for a declaration. But what was I supposed to declare? I couldn't bear it; I needed to leave. I just had to get out of there. "I'm sorry," I hastily told him, picking up the skirting of my dress and running for the door.

I ran inside the ballroom, through the crowds. I pushed my way through the mass of people, maybe a little too aggressively. Some of the onlookers might have thought I was being rude. I didn't care. Even if I did look like a lunatic. I just kept my eyes focused on the door, as if it were my salvation.

"Lola!" I heard Gabe call from behind me. I knew he was chasing after me and I wished he wouldn't. I just needed a moment to absorb everything. I needed time before I had to look into his knowing eyes again. It was too much to take in. Especially when I could see that he was looking at me like he somehow, knew all the pieces of me- and I guess he somehow did. I needed to get away from him.

I made it through the entrance and down the staircase into the foyer. Once outside, I ran with all my might, heading absolutely nowhere.

I took a moment to slip my heels off and then ran out onto the beach at full speed, holding my skirt in one hand and my heels in the other. I ran straight towards the docks, breathing heavily. The sand sunk beneath my toes with each step, but I wouldn't let it slow me down. Amazingly, I didn't feel exhausted yet. I just kept running. I ran through the stretch of yachts, relentlessly.

It was like a millionaire's playground. The beautiful boats were massive, towering around me like miniature buildings floating along the harbor. Eventually, I made it to the end of the dock I had been

running across. Gasping, I sat down along the edge. Noticing the tenderness my feet had incurred, I dipped them into the cool water, feeling a momentary relief.

But I guess I was dumb to believe that Gabe couldn't easily catch up to me. I could hear him approaching from behind.

I thought he was going to say something or call out to me as his footsteps slowed, but he did neither. He only sat down beside me along the edge of the dock. He, too, removed his shoes and then rolled up his pant legs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him slip his feet into the water next to mine.

"I don't want to talk about this right now," I told him. I could hear the exasperation in my own voice. "I've barely had a chance to absorb everything."

"I understand," he said softly.

"Don't do that," I told him.

"Do what?" he asked.

"Don't be so. . .nice."

He paused for a second. And I wanted to kick myself for saying something so stupid. It had made sense in my mind to tell him to stop being nice, but it hadn't sounded the way I meant it to once the words came out of my mouth.

Gabe only sighed before mumbling a reluctant "okay" to me. And then I started freaking out all over again because I realized how much he must understand me. *Gabe understands my nonsense*. A wrenching twisted at my heart. Only couples in their old age should understand each other's nonsense.

I tried to maintain my composure, but it completely crumbled with his nearness. I knew I didn't want to talk to Gabe about any of what I had just remembered, but I couldn't help the feelings of hurt in my heart.

"How could you?" I asked him angrily. "How could you let me go on, ignorant to everything?"

He looked pained; he truly did. I've never seen his face hold so much emotion before.

"Lola, there are things you don't understand."

"What I don't understand is that the way you have treated me ever since I've met you. . .just does not correlate with these memories!"

"I know, Lo. But the way I have felt about you has never changed. Please understand that. If you understand nothing else, please understand that I have always loved you."

"Argh, I don't even know you!"

Though I had made the statement (and I could see I hurt him by saying it), I knew deep down it wasn't true. With each passing moment, I could remember more and more details about Gabe's personality. I knew that I knew him. And it was quickly coming back to me.

"How many lives have I been like this?" An image of a saddened, lonely version of me crept into my thoughts. I think it was sometime during the nineteen fifties, maybe sixties. I inherently knew that I had been depressed for most of that life. I remembered dying young, not having the will to live.

"I'm not sure. Two, I think. Maybe three."

"And you?"

"It's been four for me."

"You've lived four lives since we--" My heart sank and I couldn't get out whatever words I had meant to say. The hurt was unbearable. Especially when I couldn't quite comprehend where it was all coming from. I stood up, ready to leave again.

Gabe grabbed my arm and pulled me to him.

"Lola, they were short, meaningless lives. It's barely been over a century since we were last together. Damn it, look at me!"

Directing my blurry vision towards his face, I could see the guilt written in his features.

"And what about Annika?" I finally understood why she had behaved so cruelly towards me. It all made perfect sense now. I remembered the night she came home, after Gabe had broken off their engagement. . .it had been the same day Gabe and I had first spoken at the beach. Guilt racked over me, remembering the sight of her tear-streaked face and how she had sobbed in Miriam's arms. "How could you do that to her?"

Gabe only shrugged. "Annika was nothing to me. She wasn't what you were."

"How could you say that?" I asked angrily. "You proposed to her! She obviously meant something to you."

I couldn't tell if I was more upset by the betrayal or that Gabe was acting so dismissive about his wayward actions with Annika.

"Lola, you can't get angry with me when you don't even understand how it was between me and Anni."

"The hell I can't!" I stood up furiously.

"Now just wait a second," Gabe's voice picked up in tenor.

"Annika and I had an understanding. I cared for her, of course, but nothing more. She wanted me to propose to her so she could have her picture-perfect life. I tried to give her that. My whole family wanted me to move on."

It was just too much to take in. I didn't want to hear about Gabe and Annika. And for that matter, I didn't want to hear about Gabe and me.

"I need to go," I said quietly.

"Please, just give me a chance to explain. There are reasons why I was never able to tell you, to explain to you who you are--"

"I can't, Gabe. I can't take anymore tonight."

"Lola, please."

"No." I said it with as much force as I could manage. He understood I meant it because he loosened the grip on my arm and his dark eyes turned away from me.

"At least promise me you'll let me see you tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said, knowing it was a blatant lie.

His grip tightened again. "I will see you tomorrow. Even if I must come to you. Don't make me hunt you down, Lola. All I want is a fair chance to explain."

I nodded tightly. But deep down, I knew it would take more than a day for me to gather the courage to face him again.

"Let me walk you home?"

"No, thanks."

He sighed loudly. "Fine." He gently pulled me towards him and kissed my forehead. The simple gesture was so achingly familiar and yet it was strangely out of place.

I pulled myself away from his grip and turned to leave. My wet feet dripped along the dock as I hurried away.

I didn't turn back. I didn't need to see his face. It was permanently etched in my mind.

SIXTEEN

I walked home in a daze. The remembering- it didn't stop even when I tried to make it stop. Dismally, I considered it ironic that I would even want it to end when I'd spent a whole lifetime wishing the memories would come back to me.

But it hurt. It physically hurt, creating a pulsating pain within the back of my head that wouldn't release.

I walked into the house, groaning from the agony of it. At least no one was home to hear me. I was thankful for that. I didn't want to have to explain this. I couldn't even explain it to myself, let alone anyone else.

The house was still, hushed almost, within the enveloping darkness of the night. I crept into my room quietly. I was dizzy, sick to my stomach. . .scared. Even within the silent haven, my mind continued to scream with sounds and flashes.

I reached for my bed, finding the soft sheets and falling into them. I begged myself to sleep, anything to escape what was happening. And eventually, I did.

But as hard as I tried to escape the memories and the images replaying in my mind through slumber, it seemed sleeping only made things terribly worse. Apparently the subconscious world was aiding in the restoration of my memories. I dreamt of my past lives all night long.

I couldn't escape them.

And even when I awoke from the dreaming, as soon as my head touched my pillow, another dream began. . .

Part Two Flashes

"Wherever you go, go with all your heart." - Confucius

SEVENTEEN

The caravan shook as the explosion of thunder struck the earth, followed by an illuminating flash of white lightning. Liliana Moori and her sister, Eryn Moori both flinched from the noise.

"It's getting worse," Eryn droned. She'd been complaining about the storm for a quite a while now.

"Your perception is astounding," Liliana commented dryly.

Eryn presented her sister with a derisive glare before turning away. Under her breath, she muttered, "God's teeth, Lily, you can be loathsome at times." Albeit, the comment had been voiced loud enough for Liliana to hear clearly.

Liliana ignored Eryn. As much as she loved her younger sister, Liliana was tired of listening to Eryn's constant whining. The storm was causing her enough anxiety as it was; they had been waiting it out for over an hour now and it didn't seem to be relenting. It was a testimony of the caravan's fine craftsmanship, which didn't allow the rain to seep inside, and Liliana was extremely grateful for that. Made entirely of wood, with a curved roof, the small caravan served as a little home on wheels. And at the moment, it was the only shelter separating her and her sister from the chaos happening outside.

Their servants courteously left the girls to wait the storm out in a separate caravan. There had been little room left in this one, due to the countless trunks they had traveled with. Liliana knew it had been pointless to bring so many things, but she couldn't bear leaving her beloved books and ancient texts behind. And Eryn had refused to part with all the beautiful fabrics she'd purchased. She was planning to have several new dresses made for her once they were back in Romania.

Home.

It was a word that was known by their kind, but little understood its true meaning. Liliana liked to believe she understood. Home wasn't a place, not really. Home was wherever you wanted to be. Wherever you were needed...wherever your heart was. Her heart had been in Paris, under the tutelage of a fine school for young ladies. It was a rare opportunity her kind didn't often receive, But Liliana had been fortunate enough to have a family who understood how important an education was, and she was also fortunate to have a family wealthy enough to provide the schooling to her and her sister. Yet now that she had completed the schooling, Liliana longed to be back in Romania with her family and her friends...her tribe. It had been nearly torture for both Eryn and Liliana to stay in Paris for three full years.

Another piercing crackle of thunder suddenly struck, this one more deafening than the last.

Eryn turned towards her now. She was unusually tense and wide-eyed. "Did you hear a gun shot, Lily?"

"No, it's only the storm. Don't worry--"

A distant scream filled the air around them. The sound of the rain muffled the noise, but Liliana inherently knew that she had heard a scream.

Eryn's green eyes filled with terror. "What was that?" she whispered.

Everything grew quieter in the darkness of their caravan. The sound of their breaths grew heavier.

"Stay here," Liliana ordered as she moved towards the door.

"Don't you dare leave me!" Eryn cried.

"I'm just going to check on the others and make sure everyone is alright. I will return quickly, I promise."

"Lily-- no!"

Liliana could see the fear in her younger sister's expression. Eryn gripped her wrists tightly, afraid to let loose.

"Go to the other caravan and wait for me there," Liliana commanded. She pulled out of Eryn's grasp and left before she could object any further. She knew her sister wouldn't be so foolish as to follow her. Eryn was too afraid of the storm.

Pulling the hood of her cloak up over her head, she made her way out into the night. A shower of stinging rain poured over her and drowned out all other sounds. Dimly, she could make out the image of the other caravan in the distance. But something caught her eye to the left of the road they'd been traveling. She immediately looked back in that direction. Startled, Liliana realized she was staring at a mass of glowing, orange flames.

Fire.

How it was even possible for there to be a fire in the pounding downpour of rain was beyond her, but she quickly moved towards it. She didn't even stop to think her actions through. She simply ran to the bright fire at full speed. A gnawing feeling that someone was in trouble rushed her. Branches slapped across her face, mud clung to the bottom of her skirts, but she trudged on.

She didn't even see the body in the midst of everything. She tripped because she'd run right over it, causing her to lose her balance. She slammed down hard onto the muddy ground.

Groaning, Liliana pulled herself up. She was almost positive her knees were scraped and bloody underneath her skirts.

Unexpectedly, she heard the low rumble of someone else's groan. She turned to view what had tripped her.

Liliana paled when she saw the man lying on the ground next to her.

Turn away and leave. It's the smart thing to do, she thought to herself.

He was young, though. Perhaps around her own age, maybe a few years older. It seemed the man was severely wounded.

Instead of retreating, Liliana found herself slowly moving closer to the still form. Blood trickled from his temple and around his eyes. She knew the mixture of rainwater concealed how devastating his wounds probably were. She wondered how much blood the man had lost, and if it might be too late for him.

Suddenly, the man began to mumble. Listening closely, Liliana attempted to make out what he was saying, but the deafening roar of

the storm muffled his low voice. The only words she could make out clearly were, "Why can't I see?" He was speaking in French.

Liliana knelt down and leaned over the young man. She shouted above the storm, "Sir, please do not worry. I have come to your aid!"

Immediately, the man clutched her arm tightly. "Who are you?" he demanded hoarsely.

Liliana batted her eyes against the rain, almost paralyzed. She suddenly questioned whether it had been a good idea to venture out into the forest and away from the safety of her caravan and people.

"I am Lily," she finally choked out. "Liliana Moori of Redwood Forest."

The man's grip loosened. He eventually fell slack against the ground.

"Sir, do you think you can stand?"

She quickly scrutinized his body, finding no injury.

When he spoke next, it was softer. He sounded defeated and tired. "I can stand. And walk, if you guide me."

She helped to pull the man from the ground, nearly knocking herself over in the process. He was very large and extremely heavy. It felt like she was trying to lift a brick wall. She soon realized it was due to the huge amount of muscle mass she felt beneath her fingertips. Good God, the man was completely solid and likely over six feet of height. Liliana had no idea how she was going to get him to the caravan.

Once he was upright, he slung his arm around her shoulders, but thankfully, he didn't place his full weight against her. It likely would have toppled her over. He merely used her body for support and guidance.

"This way," she directed him, leading him back through the forest.

It took three times the amount of time it had taken her to run into the woods for Liliana to return to the caravan with her new guest in tow. She was forced to walk slowly, taking the time to give warning for logs, brambles and other random nature that got in the way of their path.

Helping her newly rescued companion into the caravan proved to be the most difficult process of all. Without the use of his own sight, the man couldn't find the floorboards and she had to help lift him. It took a tremendous amount of effort. By the time they had both climbed inside, she was breathless and soaking wet.

She took a moment to steady her heavy breathing before directing the man towards a padded bench, which had been built into the wall of the caravan. Though it had been meant for several passengers to use for sitting, the large frame of the man nearly encompassed the entire bench while he lied across it.

Carefully, Liliana moved towards him. She looked more closely at his wound. It had appeared he had been severely burned across his temple and down along his eyes. She imagined the pain must be unbearable.

"Lady," the man called to her.

"I am here," she spoke softly. "And my name is Liliana. I told you in the woods, remember?"

"I remember," he said. She watched as he furrowed his brow. "What is your name?" she asked him.

He paused a moment, as if he were debating whether or not to tell her. Finally, he answered her. "Gabriel," he whispered, but gave no surname. Liliana sensed the man didn't want to reveal too much about himself.

"Have I gone blind?" he asked suddenly.

Liliana swallowed. She could hear the evident fear in his voice and she wasn't sure if he were asking her or himself that question. She wasn't much of a healer, not beyond the common illnesses anyway, but she attempted to examine his eyes, anyway, in order to see if there was anything that could be done.

He might have only contracted a temporary blindness, she thought hopefully as she looked him over. It almost seemed like he was involuntarily keeping his eyes closed from the blistering of the burn, but she didn't want to tell him that. After all, she was no doctor. And she certainly didn't want to give him false hope.

"I don't know if you've gone blind, Gabriel. But I promise I will find you a proper doctor and get you patched up as soon as the storm ceases. For now, why don't you try and rest?"

He made a small nod of his head to her suggestion and then leaned back against the bench.

What am I doing? Liliana wondered to herself. Maybe I've gone mad. . .

Her mother had often admonished her for bringing wounded animals into their camp to look after. Now, it seemed she was bringing back strange, wounded men.

With the dim lighting of the caravan lantern assisting her, Liliana examined Gabriel's body more thoroughly, looking for broken bones and other wounds. Beneath that burn, the man appeared to be arrestingly handsome. She wasn't sure why, but Liliana was surprised by this. He had a strong jaw line, an olive complexion and dark, unruly hair. His shoulders were broad, tapering into a lean torso and waist. His clothes were tattered from the dirt and rain, but Liliana could tell the fabrics were of high quality. She suspected the man might be a diplomat or a nobleman. He spoke perfect, French, but it was strange, he didn't look like a typical Frenchman. She wished he could open his eyes. She had the strangest yearning to see what color they were.

"How did you find me, lady?"

The sound of his deep voice startled her. She assumed he'd fallen asleep.

"I thought we went over this, Gabriel. My name is Liliana, not Lady."

He only responded with, "Your French is slightly awkward."

Though he couldn't see her, Liliana's cheeks reddened from his comment. "I didn't mean to offend you, sir. I speak seven other languages and two dialects. If you prefer, we can converse in words more suitable to your ears?"

"Settle down, I meant no insult by it. Your French is fine. I only meant that I can tell you are not a native to this country."

"No. I'm not," she admitted.

"Seven languages, eh? And two dialects? That's quite impressive."

Liliana arched a brow. She wasn't sure just yet if she trusted this man's words to be a compliment.

"Thank you," she eventually offered, for courtesy's sake. The last three years of French tutelage and etiquette had engrained such courtesies in her daily manners. She hadn't cared for the gaje's proprieties before she came to France, but now it seemed that politeness was a new trait she bore.

"So how did you find me?" he repeated his earlier question.

"I heard a gunshot. I assumed someone was hurt and I went into the woods to inspect the noise."

"Unescorted?"

The offhanded question aggravated her. She had most likely just saved this man's life- and now he was questioning her conduct?

"Yes, unescorted," Liliana replied, a little sharply. "My escorts happen to be in nearby coach. Had I made my intentions known to them, they would not have let me venture out into the woods."

"They would have been just in their decision. You put yourself in grave danger by venturing out into those woods."

"Why? Who is out there?" Distracted by his fear-invoking words, Liliana pulled back the thickly padded curtains of the caravan's small window, attempting to see something, anything, but it

was to no avail. The storm was still violently wreaking havoc. She could see nothing but the rain surrounded by darkness and more rain.

"You don't want to know," he told her grimly.

"Of course, I do," was her stubborn reply.

She heard him sigh.

"Let's just say that the kind of men who did this to me won't think twice about murdering someone who gets in their way. I'm lucky to be alive."

"So did you. . .get in their way?" she asked quietly.

"I guess you can say that."

She shifted in her seat. He wouldn't say anything more and she supposed she probably wouldn't want to know, anyway. It terrified her to think that whoever he had been running from was still out in those woods somewhere. She wished to continue traveling immediately, but the roads were flooded. The caravans would undoubtedly become stuck in the mud should they tried to carry on at this point.

"We need to leave," he warned her, as if he were reading her mind. Liliana regarded Gabriel curiously. She'd met plenty of authentic mind readers in her lifetime to know it was possible.

"The roads are wet and the storm is still raging. Exactly how are we supposed to leave?"

"As soon as the rain stops, then. You and your companions are not safe here."

She nodded in agreement, before realizing that he couldn't see her acknowledgement.

"Very well," she acceded aloud.

When she looked his way, she noticed that the man held his hands clenched at his sides.

He must be in such awful pain, Liliana surmised. In her opinion, burns were the worst sort of wound. The stinging was relentless. She could hardly imagine receiving one along the sensitive skin surrounding the eyes. It must be unbearable.

It suddenly dawned upon Liliana that she had stored some aloe in one of her trunks. She rifled through her belongings until she was able to find it, locating the bottle after a few minutes of searching, along with a few swabs of cotton.

Turning back towards Gabriel, she told him, "If you can hold still, I have something that may ease the pain."

He only nodded in response. She moved closer to him, taking in his spicy scent. Oddly, she thought he smelled nice, even though the man was covered in dirt and grime. She lifted her hand to his face, but he stopped her with his own large hand, entwining his fingers through hers.

Liliana's breath caught in her chest.

"Thank you, lady," he whispered to her. "For saving my life."

Liliana stared at the hand that held hers, taken aback by the gesture.

"It's Liliana," she reminded him, slowly regaining her train of thought.

"Liliana," he corrected himself.

EIGHTEEN

When he had been but a boy of ten years, Gabriel had fallen from an apple tree, resulting in an awful break of his right leg. Ten summers later, he had found himself in the midst of a drunken bar fight. A barrel-headed lunatic had landed on top of him with a knife, stabbing Gabriel directly below his shoulder blade. In the years that had passed since then, he had been in many fights. Some with swords, some purely pugilistic. It was safe to say he'd come across his fair share of battle wounds. But out of every pain he'd ever endured, this had to be the worst.

Well, maybe it wasn't the most painful. The pain had dulled to a small ache in the back of his head and a slight sting he felt along his eyes and across the bridge of his nose. The bruises and scrapes along his body didn't even bother him. Pain could be easily handled. But his lack of sight was the awful part. The darkness was his true pain. Though he tried not to think about it, the blindness began to terrify him.

The woman, or the angel, he wasn't quite sure yet what she was, only that she had been his savior, had taken him to some sort of inn. Her people were clearly not happy about this decision. He had heard the one she called Zara angrily whispering when they had assumed he was sleeping.

"What would your brother say to you, Lily? Do you honestly think he would approve of this?"

"I wasn't considering what he would say. Nor do I care what his opinion would be on the matter."

Gabriel figured the woman- Liliana- was trying to tune this Zara woman out, trying her best to ignore her, but it wasn't working. Zara muttered a few curses before harping out, "Your entire family would have a fit if they knew what you were up to. He isn't a sparrow with a broken wing, you know. He is a *gajo*, and some kind of refugee at that. He could be dangerous--"

"Enough!" Liliana cried. And then sighing, she breathed, "I've heard enough. Please just give me peace, Zara."

"You give no one peace," Zara tightly countered back. Gabriel could hear the sound of footsteps resounding as she angrily stomped away.

He wondered why the girl was helping him, especially when the rest of her people clearly disapproved. But she didn't seem to care. It dumbfounded Gabriel.

What was even stranger was that this 'Liliana Moori' woman was evidently a gypsy. He'd been nearly bowled over by that realization. Despite her obvious sheltered upbringing and the luxury of an education, the girl was most definitely of gypsy descent. She was one of his own kind.

Of course, he would never tell her. He'd given up on gypsy life a long time ago. Aside from his constant need to wander, Gabriel didn't even acknowledge his heritage. In fact, he despised it. But the irony that a gypsy would come to his rescue was beginning to give him a new perspective, particularly on the people he had decided to leave behind.

A doctor finally arrived later on that evening. He looked over Gabriel's injuries carefully, taking his time. Gabriel heard him leafing through pages in his medical texts and scratching a few notes.

Afterwards, he began to apply a salve to his wounds, which immediately cooled the sting of the burn. Gabriel sighed in relief.

However, after a long while, Gabriel began to feel restless. The doctor was just taking *so* long. He was most likely only being thorough, but Gabriel was impatient to know if the damage was permanent or not.

Curious as it was, he heard the girl in the background, pacing the floor, almost as restless as he was. He couldn't understand why she was behaving so strangely. It wasn't her eyesight at stake.

Eventually, the doctor spoke, although it wasn't directed towards him.

"Do you speak French?" he asked the girl in a low voice.

"Oui," she replied and, switching to the doctor's language. "Is he going to remain...the way he is?" She had a hard time asking the question.

"He'll be fine, mademoiselle," he reassured her.

Gabriel breathed a sigh of relief. This was followed by the sound of the girl's sigh of relief. It was foreign to him, a stranger caring about his welfare. The girl must be a different species of human, indeed.

"I've placed some bindings around his eyes," the doctor continued. "He needs to keep them closed. It is important that he does because this will allow his wounds to properly heal. A fortnight of bed rest should be enough time. Also, the wounds will have to be cleansed and treated daily to prevent infection. If an infection occurs, he could become permanently blinded."

"I understand. I'll tend to his wounds," she told him.

"I left an antiseptic you may use to treat him, along with a bottle of salve. The burns are not too serious. They may leave some scarring, but it will be feint. The salve should help with scarring, so make sure you apply it often."

Liliana nodded. "Merci, doctor."

"You're welcome, mademoiselle."

Upon the doctor's departure, Gabriel grinned widely. "So you will attend to me?" he asked her, suddenly feeling much better.

"I don't see anyone else here to do it," she pointed out.

"Neither do I," he rejoined in jest.

Shaking her head disapprovingly, Liliana warned him, "I wouldn't be so quick to make jokes. Just moments earlier, you feared your condition may be permanent."

Gabriel ignored her statement. He tilted his head to the side as if he were regarding her. It was a ridiculous gesture as they both knew he couldn't. "I think perhaps you might like me."

She scoffed at his bold statement. "I've only just met you. Your presumption is incorrect. However, I happen to pride myself in having a big heart. I don't mind helping a stranger in need. Especially one who so plainly needs my help."

Gabriel scowled now. She had taken a direct stab at his pride. And by the look of his indignant expression, it was quite obvious he did not favor the idea of needing anyone's help.

"You don't have to stay," he grumbled.

"I'm not going anywhere."

He paused for a moment, debating. Eventually, he said, "Then I will insist you receive payment for your trouble, lady."

"I really tire of hearing that title. I am no lady, Gabriel. In fact, I am only a lowly gypsy, and you must know this by now. Aside from that, I couldn't even be flattered by the presumed entitlement because when you speak the word '*lady*,' the tone of your voice does not quite hold the respect an actual lady would deserve."

A smile formed at his lips. "Please forgive me twofold, Liliana. I would hate to be under your ill grace. Particularly since I am so desperately in need of your assistance."

She laughed at that and moved to sit in the chair next to his bedside. "At least you are quite an amusing patient. And my first, I might add. I suppose we will have to wait to find out how skilled of a caretaker I am. But there is no need for your money, sir."

She had meant the last part of her statement. The one benefit of being under brother's rule was the heaps of money, which had been bestowed upon her. Her brother, Kristoph, was a skilled tradesman. He'd never had a problem turning a coin. And unlike most gypsies, Kristoph wasn't satisfied with earning enough money to simply get by. Ever since their father had passed away, nearly five summers ago, he had taken it upon himself to provide for their family, and their tribe for that matter. He became their *barosan*, their leader. And as it turned out, he could perform that task quite well.

"I shall pay you, anyway," he told her stubbornly. "I have some money in my coat pocket, I think. And I can render more of it as soon as I can get back to my ship."

Liliana's eyes lit up, but not from his talk of money. "You are a captain of a ship?"

Gabriel hesitated before answering. "Yes," he replied. "Sometimes."

"How exciting! I've always wanted to go to sea," she mentioned dreamily. And then, confused, she asked him, "What do you mean by 'sometimes?"

The conversation made him tense. She could tell he didn't like to talk about himself, for whatever reason. She found herself wondering if Zara was right. What if Gabriel was some sort of refugee?

"I own the vessel," he eventually answered her question, interrupting her rampant thoughts. "Usually it sails without me, as it is intended for trade purposes. But when I need to travel, I take over duties as captain. However, my brother usually holds that responsibility."

"Oh, so you have a brother?"

"You seem to be asking many questions...Liliana."

She arched a brow, skeptical of him. "As I should be," she said a bit indignantly. "I found you near a blazing fire in the woods, nearly blinded. I thought since you mentioned a brother, I could find him for you, to let him know you are alright."

"It's no use. He is most likely in Barcelona by now. *The Black Diamond* was supposed to set sail tomorrow for the Caribbean."

"That's a shame. I'm sorry."

Gabriel shrugged.

"Where does he think you are?"

"He left me in Marseilles."

Liliana had presumed he intended to say more, but he simply stopped at that. It was like pulling teeth trying to get information from him.

"That's a creative name, *Black Diamond*," she mentioned, changing the subject. "Did you come up with it?"

"Your questioning does not cease, eh?" he chuckled. "Yes, I named her. She was traded to me in exchange for a very large and very rare black diamond I had been given as an heirloom. I thought it only fitting to name her after the price I paid to retrieve her."

"You must have wanted the ship very badly, to give up something so precious," she noted.

Liliana was very aware that she continued to ignore Gabriel's complaints about her questions, but she couldn't seem to stop them from leaving her lips.

"Not really," he said, surprising her. "I mean, I do like the ship. But the heirloom meant nothing to me. It wasn't much of a loss."

She wondered why he would feel that way of something given to him from his family and she really wanted to ask him why he gave the diamond away so willingly, but she stopped herself from asking that particular question. She wouldn't cross those lines, for she felt it wouldn't be respectful. It was his business anyhow, not hers.

A long, uneasy silence filled the room. Gabriel was the one to finally break it. "So how long will you and your companions be staying here for?"

"Until you are better."

Normally, they would take up camp or sleep in the caravans, but because she was only traveling with a small group and there was no healer among them, Liliana figured she would rent a room at the first inn they found in order to locate a doctor. Thankfully, the innkeeper had directed her to the small village nearby and they hadn't had any trouble finding the old man who examined Gabriel.

"Why are you doing this?" Gabriel's expression displayed his confusion. Liliana could see he had his doubts of her motives. She didn't blame him. Gypsies did not have the best reputations. When trouble appeared, the gaje tended to point fingers at outsiders first, as was their natural inclination. Liliana knew that because of this, her people often became the scapegoats of blame. Which is why Kristoph

had made it a rule among their tribe never to stay anywhere longer than a week. Except for Redwood Forest, of course.

Redwood Forest was sort of a refuge for gypsy bands and tribes. It was a central meeting place for all fellow wanderers. It was also the place where one or more of the Royal families were guaranteed to be found at any given time. And it was the closest place to a home that Liliana had ever known. Redwood Forest was a magical place in her heart, always transforming, always welcoming and always serving as an escape from the gaje and the rest of the world.

"Why are you so quiet?" Gabriel's question broke into her thoughts. "Do you not have an answer?"

"I told you," she said. "I go where I am needed and right now, I believe I am needed here, with you."

There was a slight shake of his head. He still appeared...mystified.

"I have never met anyone so willingly benevolent. You are a rare person indeed, Liliana."

She chuckled at his compliment. "I suppose I do have one ulterior motive," she admitted. "Though I am anxious to be home, I am not as anxious to be back under my brother's command. I guess you are buying me a little time away from him."

"Why is your brother so horrible?"

"Oh, he's not *horrible*. Only very strict. He has plans to marry me off soon. I'm at that age, I suppose. I'm sure he'll sell me to whoever offers him the highest bride price. Our father is gone, so he has the control over whom I am to wed now."

"He let you come to France alone," Gabriel pointed out. "Is he really so controlling?"

"These were...special circumstances," she advised him.

"Ah, so now you are the one who doesn't like to answer questions."

Liliana was thankful he couldn't see the heat rise in her cheeks. "If you must know, I attended school in Paris. It was my father's wish for me to become a proper *lady*, as you coined me earlier."

Gabriel was now intrigued. "Strange, I always figured the gypsy people looked down upon that sort of life. Is it not considered disloyalty to leave one's tribe?"

Liliana shrugged before realizing he couldn't see her gesture. "My father lived in harsher times than these," she explained. "He has seen gypsies crucified for their way of life. He thought it would benefit me to know both worlds, to understand each existence."

Gabriel nodded. "Your father must have been very wise." Liliana smiled. "Indeed, he was."

"So now you don't want to go back to your brother's tight rule, eh? I knew there had to be some reason for you to stay."

Liliana narrowed her eyes in response to that statement. "I dislike that you find it so easy to condemn me. Do you know so few good people, that it is hard to believe there is anyone pure of heart?"

"Honestly, no," he admitted. "I don't know many good people.

And I don't know *anyone* completely pure of heart."

Liliana winced. She couldn't help but wonder how he'd become so cynical. Her curious nature sought to know more of his life. She decided she would pry more out of him in the next couple weeks, or however long she would spend acting as his caretaker.

"Well, I think it's a shame," she told him.

He only shrugged. "I believe people are inherently self-serving, including myself. Even I lack the moral virtues you seem to live by. Don't say I never warned you."

Liliana probably should take him seriously. And she believed that *he* believed he was not good. But Liliana knew people. She might not have any special abilities like some of her family members, but she could read people. It was a small and most likely an insignificant type of insight. Especially when she compared it to the many special insights she'd witnessed among her people. But it did help her to see that Gabriel wasn't a danger to her.

"Do you mean me any harm?" Liliana asked him, just to be sure.

"No."

"Well, then that's settled," she told him. "Now if you'll excuse me, I should probably check on the others. And I'll need to find you a change of clothes."

She fled the room, quickly opening and closing the door behind her.

NINETEEN

Taking care of Gabriel proved to be quite easy for Liliana.

Granted, over the first few days there were a few arguments; mostly involving him trying to do everything for himself and not letting Liliana attend to him as she thought was necessary.

He'd kicked Liliana out of his room several times, even though she was only trying to help him. The first time he did, Liliana listened from her quarters, which were directly across the hall from his. She could hear the loud noises coming from his room as he bumped into walls trying to find the chamber pot on his own. She couldn't help but giggle. *He deserves it*, she thought to herself, *for being so wretchedly stubborn*.

"What do you find so amusing?" Eryn asked her sullenly. She was lying lazily across the bed they had been sharing, reading a novel. "And what is all that noise?"

"I assume its Gabriel," Liliana replied.

"So shouldn't you go help him? Isn't that what we're staying in this horrid place for, so you can tend to him until he's better?"

"Sheesh, Eryn, you act like a princess. We are but wandering gypsies and have spent most of our lives looking through the flaps of a tent or the windows of a caravan. Why do act as if you hail from a splendid castle?"

"I may not live in a castle, but our tents are a thousand times nicer and roomier than this dreadful place."

Liliana merely turned away from her sister, rolling her eyes.

Neither Eryn nor anyone else understood why she was aiding Gabriel.

But Liliana didn't care. She was helping him because she wanted to.

And truth be told, she really liked taking care of him. Mostly because she could tell he was the type of man who would never ask for help in the first place. At first, she thought it was due to pride. But now, she was beginning to believe bravery was the more likely cause. And bravery was a trait she admired.

Amusingly, though, Gabriel didn't enjoy letting Liliana do much for him. He'd even pushed her out of his chamber when she had tried to bathe him.

Camelia, one of the elderly maids who insisted upon chaperoning Liliana every waking moment, also had a fit on that occasion. She'd nearly had hysterics from the moment Liliana started bringing hot water up to Gabriel's room.

"This is highly improper, Lily. Your brother raised you to be different from the other gypsy girls. He raised you to be a lady; he spoiled you even, with your education. And is this what you think a lady does? Going around, giving strange men baths?"

Liliana groaned. "God's teeth, Camelia. The man has been blinded. What would you have me do?"

"Let one of the men attend to him. Or myself, even. I'm married and do not have the same innocent eyes you possess."

Liliana sighed, not wanting to argue with Camelia. She would never win, anyway. "Fine," she gave in. But by the time Liliana was finished bringing the bathing water to Gabriel's room, he quickly threw her out, locked the door and wouldn't let anyone inside.

"I can bathe myself, thank you very much," was his surly response.

Outraged, Liliana exclaimed to Camelia, "The man is an imbecile and I hope he drowns!"

Camelia didn't understand the French words Liliana had shouted. And besides, Camelia was no sympathizer today; she only seemed relieved.

After a few minutes had passed, Liliana began feeling guilty about what she'd said in anger. Eventually, she found herself considering the possibility that Gabriel *could* drown. In a hurried panic, Liliana rushed to his door, pressing her ear against the keyhole. She nearly collapsed in relief as she heard the sound of water splashing from inside the room.

She sank down to the floor outside his room, resting her back against the door frame, just in case something was to happen. Closing her eyes, Liliana listened to some tune Gabriel whistled, grateful he was making noise.

Aside from the few obstacles Gabriel's pride stood in the way of, Liliana found that it was a breeze taking care of him. Although, all he really let her do was apply the salve to his eyes and change his bandages each day. But he was pleasant company. She liked spending time talking to him. There was something about him she found very

interesting. It was odd, but Liliana suspected she might have even begun to care for Gabriel. In all her lives, she'd never found herself so fascinated by a man before. She wondered what that would mean when they eventually parted ways.

Gabriel was in a restless mood when Liliana knocked on his door in the morning to check on him.

"How do you feel today?" she asked cheerfully...

"Irritated," was Gabriel's gruff reply. "I want, no, I *need* to get out of this room and this bed."

It had been six days they'd spent at the inn thus far and Gabriel had spent six days in the same room, in the same bed. He had a feeling he would go stark raving mad if he couldn't get up soon and walk around.

"But the doctor. . .he said you were to remain in bed for a fortnight."

"I don't give a damn what the doctor said!" Gabriel shouted.

He heard the girl step backwards and he imagined her flinching from the sound of his booming voice.

After a few moments, he belabored a long sigh. "I apologize." His voice softened. "But I need some physical exertion. I'm not used to all this." He stretched out his arms, gesturing to his surroundings.

Liliana stayed quiet as he attempted to stand up. He managed it, though shakily. She moved towards him and took his arm, linking it through hers. She was so close he could smell the magnolia-scented soaps in her hair. It was intoxicating, causing Gabriel to falter his step a little.

"This way," Liliana guided him. "We'll go for a walk."

He grunted with relief. "Thank you." His gratitude was wholly evident. She smiled. She couldn't help thinking that Gabriel seemed to share the restlessness of a gypsy. It was something she could relate to.

As they left, Gabriel noticed that they passed the sound of the old woman, Camelia, snoring from her usual chair in the corner of the room.

"We'll just leave her there," Liliana whispered. "I don't think she would approve of this, anyway. She's better off not knowing."

As soon as they made it downstairs and out into the open air, Gabriel took a deep breath.

"Ah," he said. "It smells nice out here. I've missed this."

Liliana enjoyed watching his pleasure. She couldn't have denied him this simple happiness. She too, would likely go insane if she were trapped inside a small room all day and night.

They walked along an open path, saying nothing for a while. He kept a quicker pace than she would have liked, but she didn't comment on it. She didn't want to ruin his delight at being outside again.

After a while, they stopped to rest at a wooden bench nestled under a tall oak tree. The breeze wafted softly in the quiet afternoon, stirring the leaves above them.

"It's amazing," Gabriel said, finally breaking the silence. "All the things you can hear, when you're unable to see them."

"What can you hear?" Liliana asked him.

"I can hear the wind," he told her. "I can almost picture the height and size of the trees just by the sounds alone."

Liliana contemplated on what he'd said, closing her eyes and listening to the sounds of the surrounding nature. She listened to the soft stirring of the leaves behind her, trying to imagine how she would picture a nearby tree if she were blind to it.

"What do you look like, Lily?" Gabriel suddenly asked her. He'd finally come to say her nickname with ease.

The question had caught her off guard and she wasn't sure how to answer him.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I merely wanted to form a mental picture of you."

"Well," she began. "I'm afraid to say that I'm very ugly, as misfortunate as that may be. I have crooked teeth, two warts on my right cheek, a cleft chin--"

Gabriel chuckled.

"I'm serious!" she exclaimed. "I'm as skinny as a beanpole; I have five moles across my forehead, a head full of frizzy hair, the same shade as dull wood. *And* I even have a lazy eye!"

Delighted by the sound of his laughter, Liliana began to laugh now, too. "I should be thankful to my brother for marrying me off to some old codger," she said between giggles. "Because I would never be able to fetch a man on my own!"

Abruptly, Gabriel stopped laughing.

"What is it?" Liliana asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," Gabriel explained. "I feel I owe you my life, Lily. I realize you're only teasing, but I also know that you're upset with your brother's intentions for your future. I'm not usually boastful, but I want to tell you something."

"What is it?" she asked, cautiously.

"I have plenty of money put away that I never really had any plans for. I could never truly repay you for what you have done for me, but I can provide you with enough money to get by. Your brother will have no need to marry you off."

Liliana smiled ruefully. "That is very kind of you, Gabriel. But it wouldn't make a difference. Though I love him dearly, my brother is a greedy swindler. I can only imagine he would figure out a way to take your money and still marry me off for the extra monies he would receive."

Gabriel's brow furrowed. "It isn't right," he proclaimed.

Liliana took his hand, patting it. "I do appreciate the sentiment."

Her small touch ignited a spark within Gabriel he'd never felt before. Suddenly, he really wanted to know what the girl actually looked like. He took her face in his hands, cupping her cheeks beneath his fingers. She flinched at his touch at first. Her breathing also wavered, but she didn't move.

"I wonder what you really look like. I doubt there is any truth to your description."

Liliana decided she was completely uncomfortable with his touching her, yet she still didn't move away. Something inside her stomach seemed to flutter. "Butterflies," she'd heard it been called before. She wondered if she were feeling these so-called butterflies at this exact moment.

He traced her face with his fingertips, smoothing her skin from her forehead down to her chin. He traced the almond shape of her eyes, along to the arch of her brows and across the bridge of her nose. He traced the outline of her lips, pausing in the center of her mouth where her lips puckered. Then, he ran his fingers through her hair, caressing the silky strands with adoration.

"My God," he finally spoke in a whisper. "You are beautiful."

"No," she said, pulling away. "I'm very plain, I assure you. Just a plain Jane."

"I think you're lying."

Liliana shifted uncomfortably. "We should probably get going," she announced.

"Hold on a moment." Gabriel grabbed Liliana's arm, pulling her closer towards him. "There is something I want to see."

"Sir," Liliana said, gulping. "You can't see anything. And I should mention that you're frightening me a little with your close proximity."

"You're right. I can't see," he told her softly. "That's why I need to *feel*."

Before she could protest, Gabriel's lips pressed down across hers and he locked her into a tight embrace. Her eyes widened at first and she tried to push him away. But then Liliana felt something she never felt before. The warmth of his lips and tongue forced hers to open and he kissed her passionately. She couldn't explain her reaction, but she began to close her eyes. And instead of pushing him away, she moved closer until she clung to him tightly. She had never felt so ignited or so alive. Every inch of her skin seemed to tingle and melt beneath Gabriel's touch.

Eventually, he was the one pushing her away. He slid away from her along the bench. She stared at him strangely as they both tried to steady their heavy breathing. Still shocked, Liliana lifted her fingers to touch her swollen lips. She couldn't manage to grasp what just happened. She wasn't sure if she even wanted to.

"I wish I could see your expression right now," Gabriel finally said aloud.

Liliana didn't say anything. She couldn't quite get the words out. Not that she had any clue what to say.

"I'm sorry," Gabriel said again. "I shouldn't have done that. I simply couldn't help myself."

Liliana found herself wishing she could look into his eyes. She wanted to know if he were feeling the same passion she had just felt.

"It's all right," she told him tentatively. "It's just that. . .I've never experienced anything like that before."

Gabriel nodded. "I forgot how innocent you must be. I promise it won't happen again."

Oddly enough, his promise didn't appease her as it should have. She was beginning to believe she must have developed some feelings for Gabriel. Liliana didn't know if she never wanted him to kiss her again. She didn't feel at all guilty for enjoying Gabriel's kiss. She was still a woman after all, though she may be young. And Gabriel was very handsome. She was no harlot. She would never be made to take a tumble with the gaje for a coin, which many of the women resorted to amongst gypsy tribes. But would it be so wrong if she wanted to kiss him again?

TWENTY

With each passing day, Gabriel's strength grew. He was impatient to remove the bandages from his eyes. Strange as it was, his predicament seemed to cause him to start seeing things in his mind. It was almost like he could see people moving about in his head. He could picture the entire inn, the surrounding fields and gardens. He could envision faceless people walking around, working, sleeping, eating or whatever they happened to be doing.

"Were you in the garden just now?" Gabriel asked when Liliana returned from her afternoon walk.

"Yes," she answered, surprised. "I figured I would freshen up your room with a cheerful bouquet. How did you know I was there?"

Gabriel shook his head, perplexed. "I don't know. I just knew you were."

"Hmm, well now that's odd...perhaps you're developing psychic awareness!" she suggested.

Gabriel snorted at her assumption.

"What?" she asked. "You don't believe in it?"

He shrugged. "And you do, of course?"

"Oh, yes. I've met too many gifted fortune tellers in my lifetime to not believe that those sorts of abilities exist."

"So do you possess such an insight?"

He could see her shaking her head in his mind, though he couldn't actually see her. "No," she sighed softly. "I think that may be another reason my father wanted me to attend a gaje school. To give me some sort of advantage, if you will, since I possess no special awareness of my own."

Suddenly, a crash sounded from below.

"Did you hear that?" Liliana asked Gabriel, bewildered by the loud noise. They both listened quietly.

Someone started screaming in the distance. At first, Liliana thought it may have only been an accident, but then she heard another terrified scream.

"Raid!"

Lillian lifted her hand to her mouth in horror.

Gabriel abruptly stood. "Lily, I can see hordes of men entering the inn inside of my mind."

"Eryn and Zara!" Liliana exclaimed. "They're in the dining hall!" She fled the room, hurrying down the wooden steps to the first level.

"Lily, no!" Gabriel shouted after her, but she paid him no attention. Her only thoughts were of her people.

He ran after her, stumbling and bumping into walls as he chased her down the staircase, then through the corridor to the main hall.

It was the last thing Gabriel could remember from that day. Something slammed into the back of his head. His mind dizzied and he fell forward, flat on his face.

TWENTY-ONE

Eight months later...

Each and every morning was always the same. Gabriel continually awoke with an enveloping gratitude as he took in the morning light with his crystal-clear vision. It had been so easy to take such things for granted in the past. It was amazing to him now, how much he appreciated the simple gift of being able to open his eyes to the world every day.

He noticed a ray of light shine through as the flap of his tent opened. His older brother, Dragos, emerged through the entryway wearing a very severe expression, which would be inscrutable to anyone but Gabriel. Paired with his dark features and intense gray eyes, his brother's hardened expression would frighten the meanest warrior. But it only proved to annoy Gabriel. Because, unfortunately, Gabriel knew that expression for what it was- plain, hard-headed stubbornness.

"I've decided to move the tribe to go with you today."

Gabriel stood up, moving to fetch his tunic. "That's not necessary."

"Have you changed your mind, then?"

"No," Gabriel replied. "I'm still leaving."

"Then we leave with you."

Dragos puffed out his broadened chest. There was an unmistakable note of finality in his tone and he practically dared Gabriel to cross him.

Gabriel turned, looking his brother in the eyes now, seeing the obstinate stare for what it was. Dragos had made up his mind already, and once his brother made a decision, he was usually determined to see it out.

Gabriel sighed, not even bothering to try and sway Dragos.

Instead, he merely pointed out, "You know you'll never keep up with me, brother."

This only seemed to make Dragos angry. "So it's going to be like that, is it? You plan to run from me?" There was, a note of bitterness in his tone.

"I'm looking for raiders. You know this. I don't want to put your people in danger."

Dragos threw up his hands in exasperation. "Again with the raiders. Will it ever end? Will you ever stop looking?"

Gabriel exhaled loudly. Turning away, he lifted the flap of the tent to walk out into the morning sunshine. There was a soft breeze rustling the leaves of the forest trees he could hear very clearly. He looked up into the sky, noticing the grayish clouds moving in. He wondered if the rain would slow him down.

"The answer is no," Gabriel proclaimed to his brother resolutely. "I will never stop looking for her."

Gabriel heard his brother muttering curses from behind him as he walked towards the dining area. Most of the tribe was currently breakfasting there. His brother's tribe only consisted of five families and a few lone wanderers- the size of the band was considered small for most gypsy tribes. But although their numbers were not large, they managed to thrive well together. It turned out that Dragos made a very fine *barosan*. Though in Gabriel's opinion, it was only natural. His brother would've made an excellent king, as well.

Gabriel was pleased that his brother had found happier circumstances than the two of them had once known long ago. It had nearly devastated Dragos when they had been forced to abandon their former tribe, for it was not in his brother to live as an abandoner. Gabriel even suspected it shamed Dragos, choosing abandonment. Because whereas Gabriel had no desire to return to the gypsy life, it was utterly engrained within his brother's soul. Not only that, but Dragos had been born to lead. He was positive his older brother could not be happy unless he was needed in that way. Gabriel simply didn't share the same needs.

The sound of morning conversations and pleasant laughter caught his attention as Gabriel headed towards the heady scents of freshly cooked eggs and porridge. He'd seen the people in his mind already, eating and conversing with one another, before he'd ever walked into the dining area.

It was still strange to him...this form of sight. Gabriel had found out in the last few months that he could stretch his mind to view his surroundings. The images would come to him long before he ever saw them with his own eyes. The only reason he could come up with to explain his new form of vision was that the temporary

blindness he'd experienced invoked some sort of sensory vision. He'd told no one yet. It was still so unreal to him that Gabriel continually wondered if he were imagining it all.

He nodded in greeting as he passed Samina, his new sister through marriage, on the way to the food bins. Dragos had married the girl almost immediately after they'd abandoned the Royals. She'd been part of Dragos's reasons for finally leaving. In their previous tribe, a wife had already been chosen for Dragos. He'd had no choice in that decision. But now, Dragos had been given the right to choose. And he'd married for love. It was a good match. Gabriel had never seen two happier people.

As he looked through the bin of fruits, Gabriel picked up an apple, tossing it up into the air to test its ripeness.

"Gabriel," Samina had acknowledged him and smiled.

"Good morning, Sam."

"Make sure you take time to eat a little more," she admonished. She shoved a bowl of porridge into his hands for good measure.

"I don't have time--"

"Sit," she commanded and motioned him towards a wooden bench. Much to his annoyance, Gabriel obeyed her, preferring not to rile her so early in the day. Samina often became grouchy when he tested her patience.

Dragos followed behind him with a bowl of porridge in his hands and a grin on his lips. "Maybe she should command you to stay, eh?" he suggested.

Gabriel shook his head. Between bites he said, "It wouldn't work. She's already tried."

"Sami's not happy you're leaving, either. And she thinks it's my responsibility to make you come to your senses. She's going to give me hell when I try to explain to her I didn't succeed."

"I'm sure you'll manage just fine."

"You don't feel guilty about causing problems in my marriage? You're heartless, brother."

Gabriel arched a thick brow. "New tactics, Drag? Are you trying to drive me down with guilt?"

"Is it working?"

"No."

Dragos voice became sullen. "Then I suppose I'll have to think of something else."

Gabriel sighed. It was no use. He was sure this would go on until he was long gone from his brother's camp- and hopefully that would be very soon.

Looking out into the distance, Gabriel noticed an unfamiliar wagon had been driven onto their camping grounds and left sitting at the riverside.

"Who does the wagon belong to?" Gabriel asked his brother curiously.

Dragos's eyes focused in on the wagon. "Oh, them. It's just a group of peddlers."

"What are they selling?"

"Mostly fabrics and spices. They also have a few performing monkeys that they're looking to take off their hands, but nobody around here wants to pay their asking price. I'm glad of it. I don't think Ringo would like having monkeys around, anyhow."

Ringo was the dancing grizzly bear Dragos had trained since it was a cub. It had always been hard for others to believe his brother had managed to tame the wild bear, which continued to draw audiences in so they could see it for their own eyes. Dragos had become quite fond of Ringo throughout the years and liked to show him off. Strangely enough, the huge grizzly bear had become a pet of sorts.

"Also, the peddlers are selling a few slaves that they brought in from Istanbul," Dragos mentioned casually. "But no one has seen them yet. They're going up for auction at noon."

"Did you tell them this tribe isn't a slave-bearing tribe?"
"Tried to."

Gabriel raised a thick brow now. "Are you thinking of actually purchasing slaves, brother?"

Dragos shrugged. "Depends on the price. They say that one of their slaves is a beauty beyond compare. If this is true, I could easily make a tidy profit by reselling at the market in Rabat. Since we'll most likely lose track of you, I suppose I'll head that way next."

Gabriel shook his head in distaste. This annoyed Dragos and caused him to scowl. "Did you forget I have mouths to feed?" he asked harshly.

"You seem to be doing just fine with Ringo's profits and the wood carvings," Gabriel pointed out.

Dragos began to curse again, causing several pairs of eyes to look their way. "You try taking care of these people since you're so high and mighty-- or did you forget that you left me with that responsibility?"

They'd had this fight too many times before and Gabriel was in no mood to rehash it. Especially not in front of an audience. Instead, he merely reminded his brother, "I abandoned that life completely, Drag. I had no idea you planned to set up your own tribe."

"I didn't plan on it," Dragos grumbled. "I didn't realize I had followers when we decided to abandon the Royals."

Gabriel frowned. He understood the bitterness he heard in Dragos's voice. It had been the most difficult for Dragos to leave. More so than it had been for Gabriel or their younger brothers. But he wished that Dragos could simply understand that he just wasn't made for this life. Not anymore.

"You're too likable," Gabriel sighed. "People want to follow you. People don't trust me enough to follow me blindly."

Dragos mulled over that comment for a while before agreeing. "Likable, eh?" He scratched his head in thought. "I suppose that *is* true."

Gabriel watched as his brother's attitude completely transformed. He now beamed from ear to ear with this new realization. Gabriel rolled his eyes. "Wipe that smug look off your face, Drag. I didn't mean that *all* people like you."

"Jealous?" Dragos asked.

Gabriel snorted in response.

Their attention was distracted, however, as an older man and his daughter approached their table.

"Good morning, Peter," Dragos greeted the man.

"Good morning, your high--" Peter cut himself short, slightly paling. "Forgive me, I still forget."

Dragos waved the man's blunder aside. "No worries. Though it is simply Dragos now."

Peter nodded. "Of course." He gestured to the lovely blonde girl standing behind him. Her name was Ana. She was fifteen now, with pale green eyes and rosy cheeks. Peter had been offered many different bride prices for Ana since she reached a marriageable age, but he'd refused them all.

When Dragos had asked him why, he had simply said that Ana wasn't ready. He wanted to wait until she was older, much like the gaje tended to do. Though the girl's beauty would most certainly bring the tribe a small fortune, Dragos had never pressured Peter to find Ana a husband. He supposed it was because he was beginning to understand a father's love in many ways. Samina had borne him twin baby girls just last summer. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to watch his own daughters leave the tribe one day.

Slowly, Peter guided his daughter to stand before them.

"If it's all right, my daughter would like to speak to your brother."

After Gabriel nodded in approval, Dragos said to Peter, "It's fine. Bring her here."

Ana wasn't nervous, as most were upon meeting one of the Constantin brothers. She was tall for her age, and she stood proudly with her shoulders squared and her head held high.

She moved to sit across from Gabriel at their table, smiling. "I wonder if I may take your hand, sir?" she asked politely.

It was obvious then that she was going to read for Gabriel. He cast a suspicious look towards his brother.

Dragos held up his hands. "I swear I had nothing to do with this, Gabe."

Still doubtful, Gabriel held his hand out to the girl, anyway. He supposed it was out of curiosity.

"I had this feeling that I needed to tell you something today.
Usually my feelings are always correct. My mama says I possess
great insight."

Gabriel merely nodded. "Tell me what you see, girl," he implored her, granting his permission.

She took a deep breath and then closed her eyes as she held Gabriel's hand.

They all stayed very quiet as they waited for Ana to speak.

Suddenly, her lips formed a pensive moue and her forehead creased as she became lost in thought.

"You are looking for something." Ana acknowledged.

"That is known by many." Gabriel shrugged, so far unimpressed.

This caused Ana to smile again. "You are always the cynic," she asserted

"Ana!" Peter gasped, afraid his daughter had insulted Gabriel.

"It's all right," Gabriel told Peter. "Let her finish."

Hesitant to do so, Peter didn't say anything more and let his daughter continue her reading.

"As I was saying," she began again. "You are always the cynic. Not because you haven't seen the truth for your own eyes. But because you don't want to believe it. And because you're doubtful of your own capabilities."

Now Gabriel was intrigued. If she was referring to his newfound sight, there was no way she could have known that on her own. No one knew about it. Not even Dragos.

"Sapphires," Ana mentioned, perplexed. "Do sapphires mean anything to you?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Hmm." She shrugged. "I'm not sure, either."

She held his hand more tightly now. "Whatever it is you're looking for, it's closer than you think. Is it a person?" Ana asked. But she didn't give him time to answer. "It is a person," she declared resolutely. And then in a mere whisper, she added, "And she is very close."

Gabriel pulled his hand from Ana's grasp. She snapped open her eyes. "Thank you, girl," he said. He took a few coins from his pocket and threw them down on the table.

"Your mama must be right about that insight, but I have to leave now."

Ana shook her head. "No!" she beseeched him. "If you leave now, you'll miss her."

Gabriel laughed, though it was only in vain. He hadn't truly laughed in a long time. Not since...he refused to even think about it.

"Nice work, Drag," he told his brother angrily. "I almost bought it."

"Gabriel, I told you I had nothing to do with this!"

"I'm going to pack my horse." He stood up from the table. "If you try and stop me, brother, I swear I will take my fists to your face."

TWENTY-TWO

Gabriel packed his horse's saddle quickly. Anger caused him to move faster. His brother was getting on his damned nerves. But Gabriel suspected the real reason he was so angry stemmed from frustration. He was simply frustrated and he knew it was because he still had not found her.

The group of raiders that had invaded the inn that last night in France had moved out quickly and undetected. They were long gone before Gabriel had ever regained consciousness. He didn't waste any time searching for her, either. He'd torn off his bandages, not caring if he was fully healed or not at that point. Thankfully, he'd regained the ability to open his eyes and his full vision had been restored. But he hadn't had the time to feel grateful back then. His only thoughts were of finding her- and then murdering the beasts who had taken her.

Normally, he could track down anyone. But under these circumstances, there were simply no leads. Once he'd left the village, he'd followed a trail down to the south of France, but it had only brought him to a dead end. The only thing he had to go by was a name-- *Faucon*. The innkeeper had believed the name belonged to an infamous pirate.

More than anything, Gabriel wished he had seen the girl's faceif only just once. Even with the return of his sight, he still felt helplessly blinded. Without any sort of description to go by, it would be nearly impossible to locate her. He just knew that he had to. She'd saved him so selflessly and without any hesitation. If he had to, he would spend the rest of his miserable life trying to save hers. He owed her that much.

"I heard you're on your way out."

Gabriel had known his younger brother had been lurking behind him for a few minutes now, but he hadn't said anything. Raphael had always enjoyed the element of surprise. It was just a weird habit of his, sneaking up on people. And Gabriel hadn't felt like explaining his newfound sight to anyone just yet, so when he turned around, he said for good measure, "Didn't realize you were standing there."

Raphael smirked. He was standing with his arms crossed, casually leaning against the fence post where all the horses were tethered to.

"I'm going with you," he announced.

"No, thanks."

Raphael's grin soured. "Why not?" he asked. "I can fight better than most men, you know. And I'm not bad with a sword. You could benefit from having me around."

"This isn't up for discussion, Ralph."

Raphael groaned, exasperatingly. "I swear, you and Drag treat me like a damned infant. D'you realize I'm almost twenty-one years of age?"

"It's not about your age," Gabriel explained while securing the pack on his horse and grabbing the reins. "This is just something I have to do alone."

Raphael was about to say more when their attention was distracted. They both looked up, finding the newcomers heading into their camp. What was odd was that one of the men pulled a young woman by a rope that bound her by her wrists. She shrieked loudly and defiantly, pulling back against the rope. The noise is what caught both Gabriel and Raphael's attention in the first place.

Gabriel watched as the woman tugged against her bindings with so much force that she ended up falling down in the dirt. In that moment, as she picked herself up off of the ground, she looked up and noticed the two of them staring at her.

Her dark, sooty lashes lifted and she stared back at them with the most enchanting blue eyes Gabriel had ever seen. They were very unusual, tilted at a slight, exotic slant. Her skin, however, was very light in color, very fair, unlike the swarthy olive skin of most gypsies. She had jet-black hair, which had been left loose, flowing over her shoulders and back in spiraling waves. The darkness of her hair paired with her fair skin and exotic eyes made for an interesting combination. Gabriel couldn't seem to take his eyes away from her.

Without a doubt, she had to be the beautiful slave Dragos had mentioned at breakfast. And she was obviously dressed to sell. A plain, white cotton gown adorned her, tugging at her every curve. Though Gabriel was captivated by her, it made him sick to realize just what kind of slave the girl would surely end up becoming.

She couldn't be gypsy, he mused. Her skin was too fair. He doubted she was English or French, either, for her features were too

exotic. Perhaps a Spaniard, or maybe Russian. He wondered how she ended up in slavery.

"Come on, girl!" The command was growled from the large man who held the rope as he jerked the young woman forward. She stumbled, but caught her footing this time. Strangely, as the group moved on, the girl continued to look over her shoulder, still staring blatantly at Gabriel and Raphael without an ounce of shame.

Without thinking, Gabriel left his horse and followed the group down to the riverside. And as soon as he realized Gabriel was walking away, Raphael quickly trailed after him.

"Ahh, your highnesses, how nice to see you both." This was said by a shorter man who sported a black eye patch. The man had walked over to Gabriel as he'd noticed him approaching.

"None of that," Gabriel said. "You can drop the title as it no longer belongs to either of us."

"Of course," The man smiled crookedly. "I am Ivan, by the way. I am the leader of this little band of peddlers."

Gabriel nodded.

"Would either of you like to view our wares today?"

"Tell me about the slave girl, the one you took over to the river. Who is she?"

Ivan looked towards the group Gabriel had gestured to.

"Aye, but there are many females for sale in that group. I was planning to put them on display for your people at noon. But if it pleases you, I will allow you and your brother to look over the goods beforehand, eh?"

He smiled crookedly again, running his jeweled fingers through his greasy black hair.

"If there are many slaves in that group, why do you only have the one tied up?" Raphael asked this question, though Gabriel had been thinking the same thing.

Ivan frowned. "Oh, her. The rope is a precaution. She has tried to escape many times. I'm sorry to tell you both this, but that one is not for sale. We already have a buyer lined up for her in Rabat- an Arabic Dey. He's offered a heavy price for the girl."

"My brother said you were selling a beauty beyond compare. What is she, if not that?" Gabriel asked.

"Aye, she is a beauty, that one," Ivan agreed. "Nasty little thing, though. She bit me twice." He said this part bitterly, while lost in thought. "Anyway, she is not the beauty I mentioned to your brother. Come; let me show you the girl I was referring to."

As they followed Ivan, Raphael nudged Gabriel in the ribs, asking, "What's this all about, brother?"

Gabriel shrugged. He didn't really care to see any of Ivan's other slaves. But he didn't know how to answer his brother. He only knew that he wanted the chance to get closer to the girl with the blue eyes. He had no idea why. Something about her intrigued him.

"Brutus!" Ivan shouted. "Bring Eryn to me."

A few minutes later, a young girl with dark hair was being shoved to stand before Gabriel and Raphael. Granted the girl was beautiful with emerald green eyes and rosy cheeks, but her beauty did not compare to the woman who Gabriel continued watching with his

mind's eye down by the river. She was still watching them, too. He could see her doing it.

"This is Eryn. Lovely as a rose, isn't she? Of course, her price will be higher than any of the others. But I can give you a special deal if you're interested in purchasing her today."

Gabriel barely paid any attention to Ivan. His mind was still focused on the other girl. He could see her guard untying her bindings. He then handed her a rag, which she used to wash the dirt and grime from her face and hands. She continued to watch them as she scrubbed.

"Well, you're a pretty one, aren't you?"

Gabriel turned to see that Raphael was toying with the slave girl. He lifted her hair and brought it to his nose.

"Like roses," he breathed.

"Ralph," Gabriel warned.

"What?" he asked. "I'm thinking of making a purchase. Could use a woman's touch around my tent, if I do say so myself." He brought the girls hand up to his lips. "Nice to make your acquaintance, m'dear."

The girl wriggled out of his grasp and turned away from Raphael. It was then that Gabriel realized how frightened she was. He could see the fear plainly showing in her eyes, though she tried very hard to mask it with a haughty air. He doubted she'd been a slave for very long. She lacked the submissive attitude and she wasn't completely broken.

Gabriel preferred not to see where this was headed.

"Eryn, this is your only warning." Ivan's voice was menacing. He'd caught her shaking away from Raphael's touch.

"Come on, Ralph. You're not buying anything today," Gabriel commanded. "Let's go."

"Who says so? Because I haven't forgotten that you're planning to leave. So I can buy whatever I damn well please."

He grabbed the girl's hand again, yanking her towards him more forcefully now, though he'd only done it to spite Gabriel. Once he'd realized he might have hurt her, Raphael had turned back to the girl to offer an apology, "Sorry, lass--" He hadn't even gotten the words out of his mouth before a swing was taken at him from a most unusual source.

Raphael was nearly knocked over. In fact, the force of the hit had splintered his lip open from being knocked into his front tooth. He touched his bloody mouth before looking up to find the young woman with the blue eyes angrily attempting to take another swing at him.

"You bloody knave!" she screamed as she lunged for him. At this point, her guard had caught up to her and effortlessly secured the girl by the waist, lifting her up off of the ground.

"Not her face!" Ivan screeched, panicking. "It's too valuable."

The guard merely tossed his captive on her backside, knocking the wind out of her. She choked as she tried to catch her breath, coughing sporadically. Gabriel held his own breath until he heard the woman breathe again. Ivan turned back to Gabriel and Raphael now, his dark eyes still panicked. "My sincerest apologies, sirs. She is crazy, that one. I swear I'll have her whipped."

Gabriel frowned. "I don't believe that's necessary." He turned towards his brother. "Is it necessary, Ralph?"

He could tell that Raphael was holding back his anger. Gabriel was sure that his brother's pride was severely wounded from getting hit by a woman. He was young and still carried his ego around with him. Thankfully, Raphael swallowed back his pride and let it go. "It's not necessary," he agreed with Gabriel.

"I insist," Ivan said. "She will need some form of punishment, anyhow. This cannot be overlooked."

When Raphael didn't immediately oppose Ivan's offer, Gabriel stared daggers at his brother. "No, it's *fine*," Raphael said emphatically to Ivan, but while looking at Gabriel. "Just have the girl apologize and we'll forget it ever happened."

"Good boy, Ralph, that was very benevolent of you," Gabriel mentioned sarcastically.

Raphael rolled his eyes.

Ivan merely nodded to the guard, who picked the girl up from the ground by her arm and shoved her forward so that she stood directly in front of Raphael.

"Let's hear it, then?" Ivan instructed her.

But the girl didn't apologize. She continued to openly express her abhorrence through a pair of angry, slitted eyes. She wasn't trying to hide how she felt. Not one little bit. Gabriel didn't like where this was headed- for the second time around.

The guard pushed her again, knocking her closer to Raphael. "You 'eard him, girl. Apologize *now*."

The beautiful girl still wouldn't apologize, however. Instead, she spat at the ground before Raphael's feet.

Gabriel was speechless. And Raphael had become even angrier. "You wicked little viper--"

"Forgive me, sirs," Ivan cut in. "She's apparently chosen the whipping over a simple apology and so that's what she'll get. Maybe it will bring some sense to her."

The guard re-tied her bindings, cutting into the flesh of her wrists. Gabriel noticed the woman's wrists had already turned bright red and were starting to bleed from the scratchy rope. She hissed with pain as her guard yanked her up.

"Ralph!" Gabriel shouted.

"What?" Raphael shouted back. "She chose her fate. All she had to do was apologize. She deserves whatever she gets!"

With that said, Raphael stomped away, holding his sleeve to his bloody mouth, nursing his wound like a spoiled child. Gabriel was pretty sure his brother was nursing his ego, as well.

TWENTY-THREE

The Constantin brothers.

Liliana had heard the name repeated by various members of the tribe whose camp they currently inhabited. It was just a simple name, but she was well aware of the underlying connotations attached to it. Unfortunately for the Constantin brothers, that name meant many things.

It said that they were abandoners, for one. If that wasn't bad enough, it said that they were *Royal* abandoners. That name also meant that they were traitors- the very worst kind of traitors.

They were...murderers.

Liliana wondered why other gypsies chose to follow the Constantins. Granted, she hadn't seen that many caravans or tents, so there probably weren't very many people amongst their small band of gypsies. But...how could anyone follow a Constantin? It was beyond her capability of understanding.

"Why couldn't you just apologize, Lily?"

Eryn had just been tossed into the caravan's extremely cramped holding cell alongside Liliana. The cell was barred from the rest of the wagon, an ideal accommodation for transporting slaves.

Hugo, one of the peddlers and Liliana's recently assigned guard, locked the cell with a resounding *click*.

"Thanks, Hugo," Liliana called out. "You're doing a great job as Ivan's personal puppet."

Hugo merely grunted in response. He rarely ever reacted to anything Liliana said to him and she hated him all the more for it. She'd even shouted and screamed the vilest expletives imaginable at him- so vile that she wouldn't even speak that way amongst a group of barbarians- but he *still* wouldn't say a word to her. He could bloody well be made out of stone, for all she knew. Liliana waited in anticipation for the day when she could escape Hugo. She would gladly beat that man to death if she could.

Eryn plopped down beside Liliana on the wooden floor. "Why do you do that?" she asked, sighing. "You know it does no good."

"Since when did you begin speaking to me, anyway, Eryn?"

Eryn shrugged. "I suppose since I figured out you're an utter fool. Now I've decided I pity you more than I hate you."

"Well you can go right back to hating me," Liliana advised her sister angrily. "I liked you much better when you had nothing to say."

Eryn looked away, rolling her eyes in the process. She kept her head held high even within the confines of her newfound status of a slave. She maintained a high-handed temperament, as if she still considered herself above everyone and everything. Liliana envied her sister that, surprisingly. With each passing day, she could feel her own spirit breaking. She was starting to lose hope, and Liliana knew hope was all she had to get by with.

She should have said something to him.

He *might* have rescued them.

Liliana sighed, remembering the recent events. As soon as she locked her eyes upon him, she'd known right away it was Gabriel, though he'd been clueless to who she was. He'd looked right at her, stared at her even. But he had no idea.

Never in her wildest dreams had she expected to see Gabriel again. There had been so many, many nights since her capture that she had cried herself to sleep at night, wondering if he were even alive...and here he was, in such an unlikely place, hidden in a forest along the southern coast of Spain. Gabriel was alive, healthy and beautiful.

And he was a descendent of the Constantin Royals. Third in line to the throne, to be exact. He was a prince- a prince with a very big, black mark against him.

She probably shouldn't have rescued him.

Liliana winced. Maybe that was too harsh. On the other hand, he'd known from the beginning that she was a gypsy. And he'd never admitted to who he was. All this time...she shook her head in awe. She'd never even guessed he was of gypsy descent, much less a Royal. Well it was no wonder he hadn't admitted *that* part of his background. She probably wouldn't admit to it, either. But he could have at least made it known that he was a fellow Rom.

She couldn't ask him to help her. In fact, she refused to. She couldn't take the chance that he would say no. Ivan would probably kill her and Eryn for attempting escape. It was too risky.

And it was obvious she could never trust Gabriel again, anyway, especially after he'd almost purchased Eryn! Liliana would

never forgive him for that. And as far as his arrogant friend was concerned, she hoped he rotted in hell. It was disgusting, watching him put his hands on Eryn in the manner that he had. It was as if they were inspecting a bloody herd of chattel.

Now that she thought about it, the other man sort of resembled Gabriel. She'd bet they were siblings. There were three Constantin brothers in total. There had been others before, but they'd all been seized before leaving Redwood Forest and promptly executed for their crimes. She wondered if Gabriel felt at all guilty for the crimes his family had committed.

Eryn suddenly shifted in the cramped space they were enclosed within, just a slight movement Liliana noticed through her peripheral vision. The movement distracted her thoughts back to her sister. Eryn never should've had to endure all of this. And if Liliana hadn't insisted they stop at the inn...who knows, they may have never been captured in the first place.

Was it a mistake not asking Gabriel for his help?

Liliana hated to think she was risking Eryn's future only to save her own pride.

"I should have known you'd be more trouble than you're worth."

The slimy, hoarse voice came from Ivan. Both Eryn and Liliana looked up to find him standing outside their cell, looking down upon them with apparent disgust.

"There was a reason that no good, rotten pirate sold you two to me for such a low price. I should've figured as much at the time." Liliana hid her smile. Faucon had been all too glad to get rid of them. She'd remembered the face he'd made when she kicked him square in the stomach after he'd tried to manhandle her. The kick had rendered him nearly breathless for a good hour. He'd wanted to throttle her afterwards, but instead, he'd decided to sell both her and Eryn to Ivan, whose band of peddlers had just ridden into the camp of raiders.

Liliana almost preferred Faucon to Ivan. Faucon may have been a ruthless pirate, but he had also harbored a strange fear of gypsies. He'd been too afraid they would cast a curse upon him and his crewal loathsome prospect for a sailor headed out to sea. Neither Eryn nor Liliana knew any curses, but both of them were happy to let Faucon believe otherwise.

Unlike the pirate, Ivan bore no fear of them at all. In fact, most times he was even a little cruel.

"Get up," Ivan commanded as he unlocked the door. "It's time for your backside to feel the sting of your defiance."

Liliana winced. She hadn't expected this to come so soon. Then again, Ivan was probably beyond livid after what she'd done.

"No!" Eryn pleaded, bolting upright.

"You." Ivan looked upon Eryn now. "Stay out of this."

"Please, Ivan," she begged. "She was just trying to protect me."

"Eryn, stop," Liliana commanded. "Everything will be okay, I promise."

Ivan chuckled, a foul noise.

"So you do not fear your impending lashes, do you, draga?"

Liliana shrugged, trying as best she could to keep her head held high. "I'm not afraid of you."

His lips tightened and he twirled a finger through the curl at the end of his beard. "We shall see your fear emerge very shortly, I suspect."

Ivan shouted for Hugo. Moments later, he was there to bind Liliana's hands and then escort her out of the caravan.

"I've changed my mind," Ivan announced at the last minute.

"The sister will come to watch." He grabbed Eryn by her arm.

"Maybe watching your sister's punishment will help you persuade her to not come to your rescue next time, eh?"

Gabriel was ready to leave when he saw the giant man dragging his hostage across the field with his mind sight. He tied the young woman to a post, far from the camp. Gabriel assumed it was so no one could hear her cry out.

This shouldn't be bothering him so much. It was none of his damned business, anyway. But it *was* bothering him. And he couldn't shake the feeling away.

If the girl hadn't been so stubborn, she could have easily been released from her punishment. Gabriel tried to remind himself of that fact. But what if she'd thought it wouldn't have mattered? He began

to wonder if the people who kept her were cruel. He wondered if she didn't apologize to Ralph because she'd presumed her people would lie to Gabriel and his brother- and then punish her anyway.

Damn. It was thoughts like these that kept Gabriel lingering around the camp instead of heading out like he should be doing.

His horse was saddled and packed. He was all set to leave. And if he didn't leave now, he'd never make it to the next town by nightfall.

Suddenly, he heard a scream. Gabriel immediately looked up.

The sound was far away, but he knew it hadn't come from the girl with the blue eyes. No, it had come from the other girl- Eryn.

The lashes had begun.

Turn away and leave. It's the smart thing to do, Gabriel thought to himself.

But he couldn't leave. Instead, he found himself riding towards where the whipping was taking place. He must be a fool. He didn't even have a plan.

As he was riding, he heard something that caused him to flinch. He moved closer, pushing the horse into a gallop. He could hear the terror in her voice and the tears in her eyes. She was screaming at the top of her lungs, trying to break free of her bindings.

"Stop!" she screamed over and over. "Please, I beg you! *Stop hurting Lily*!"

The color drained from Gabriel's face. It was as if it all came crashing down on him at once. The name- *that* name triggered it.

Lily.

The face that was etched in his mind by the curves he had traced with his fingers was the same face of the girl with the enchanting blue eyes. He instinctively knew it.

It was his Lily.

Gabriel rode at full force, without sparing any time to think. The giant man had already thrown four more lashes in the time it had taken him to ride over. As soon as he'd reached them, he jumped off his horse and yelled, "Stop!"

Their leader blocked his path, saying, "Constantin, this is none of your concern. The girl was due for this punishment. She will receive twenty lashes."

Eryn was openly crying now, tears streaming down her face. Her body was spent from trying to break free from the rope that bound her. "Please stop," she sobbed. "Stop hurting Lily."

The girl's quivering voice sounded pitiful.

Gabriel merely pushed Ivan out of his way, but he hadn't made it in time before the brute dealt his next lash. He was about to throw the whip down again when Gabriel caught it with his own hand. It snaked around his arm, slicing his skin open with the sheer force the guard had put behind it. Gabriel hissed as the throbbing sting took over.

He knew he couldn't give into the pain just yet. Instead, he pulled the whip out of the giant's hands, then used his left hand to punch him in his jaw.

The guard was so big, Gabriel's hit was hardly enough force to knock him over, but he did sway a little. Before he had time to

process what was happening, Gabriel swung at him again, with more force. Blood spilled from his nose and the man swaggered backwards. When he still didn't fall, Gabriel removed his gun from his belt. This time, the man was ready for him and swung back, but missed. It was the perfect opportunity because Gabriel was able to take his gun and strike it against the back of his head. The man fell to the ground, unconscious.

Breathing heavily, Gabriel slung the whip away from his arm and turned back to Lily. She was lying on the ground, motionless. Her arms were held rigidly over her head and her hands clenched around the rope bound to her wrists. Though she kept her eyes tightly shut, a single tear had managed to fall across the length of her cheek.

Gabriel sighed despondently. He hadn't gotten to her quickly enough. The white camisole she wore was streaked with blood along her back. It actually made him sick to his stomach knowing she'd had to endure it.

"Constantin," Ivan called out. "You have no right--"

Gabriel cut him off. "Don't forget who you're speaking to, peddler. I won't think twice about lying you on the ground next to your man."

"What is the meaning of this?" Ivan asked.

"The meaning of *this*," Gabriel snarled. "Is that these two girls are no longer your slaves. I am going to give you one hour to pack up your people and your things-- and then you will get the hell out of my camp."

Ivan swallowed. His jaw line became rigid, as if he were trying to reclaim his dominance over the situation. "I will leave your camp, Constantin. But I'm taking *my* property with me."

"These women were never yours to claim," Gabriel informed Ivan. "In fact, I was at the inn with these girls when Faucon raided it and took what didn't belong to him. Unfortunately, I didn't have my sight at the time, so I failed to realize it until now."

"It makes no difference to me how Faucon came by them," Ivan told him, trying his best to sound menacing. "I have paid a price for each of them. They belong to me now."

"I'll double your price for your trouble."

"You don't understand." He finally let, the desperation he was hiding reflect in his tone. "This one has already been bought and paid for." He motioned to Liliana. "If I don't show up with her in tow, I am going to be in a lot of trouble."

Gabriel moved to his horse. He removed a bag of coins from the saddlebag, which he promptly tossed before Ivan's feet.

"Now you can pay him back. That should be more than enough and you're lucky I'm giving you anything at all. Get out of my camp, Ivan. Before I change my mind."

Ivan knew he was at a loss. There was nothing more he could say or do. Gabriel watched as he angrily stormed away.

Once he was gone, Gabriel knelt down beside Liliana's still form. He carefully untied her ropes, trying his best not to move her.

"How could you let this happen to yourself?" he asked her sullenly.

But she didn't say anything. Truthfully, he didn't expect her to. Whatever her reasons were, she had made it apparently clear that she would rather undergo extreme pain than to identify herself to him. Furthermore, her actions led him to believe she found a life of slavery preferable than merely asking him for his help.

He'd never been so upset with someone in his entire life. If Liliana wasn't already severely wounded, he would've liked to soundly throttle her.

The thought of causing Liliana more harm made Gabriel feel instantly guilty. But he couldn't help it. There was an intense rage building in his core- all because of this woman. This *stupid* woman.

Gabriel forced himself to push away his anger- for now. He'd deal with it later. "I'm going to have to lift you," he said. "I'll try to avoid your wounds, but unfortunately, you'll probably feel even the slightest of movements. Do you think you can bear it?"

Her eyes were open now. He noticed there was a brief hesitance before she nodded. He wasn't sure if it stemmed from fear of more pain, or for fear of trusting him.

Gently, Gabriel reached underneath Liliana's body to lift her by pushing her stomach upward. "I would carry you, but I fear it would hurt worse."

"I can walk." Her voice was uneven and whispered. But she maintained her stance as he continued to push her by her stomach until she was standing upright. "Here, lean against me." Gabriel pulled her flat against his side.

"All you have to do is move your feet," he told her. "I'll try and take most of your weight."

She winced, biting hard on her lower lip. He paused, feeling helpless. He wished he could take her pain from her. He wished he could bear it for her.

It was in that instance that Gabriel's world came crashing down on him for the second time that day. The pain eventually subsided and she looked up into his eyes, and he could see that for the first time she expressed a small measure of trust in her gaze.

Those eyes, those enchantingly intoxicating eyes. They were the exact color of a bright sapphire brooch Gabriel's mother used to wear while she was alive.

"Do sapphires mean anything to you?" Ana, the young seer, had asked him that question earlier. He hadn't understood before. It seemed so meaningless. Sapphires didn't mean anything. Until now...

Now he understood the true depth of what those eyes really meant to him. When Liliana had looked upon him in that one instance, he had given her his heart, his soul, even. He realized now, in her eyes, he glimpsed a side of himself that desperately wanted to be worthy of someone like her. He refused to let go of whoever that person may be. Liliana may have developed an indifference to him he didn't fully understand yet, but he was determined to rid her of it.

"You can move forward now. I'm alright," she assured Gabriel, mistaking his long pause for caution.

He moved forward, staring at Liliana with a newfound wonder. He was unexpectedly in awe of her sheer existence.

TWENTY-FOUR

Liliana winced as she felt the cold cloth rest against one of her wounds.

"I'm sorry, draga. I know it must be very painful."

The woman (she'd said her name was Samina) had a very soothing voice. It reminded Liliana of her mother. An intense bout of homesickness crept up on her in that moment. These past few months, she'd tried to stay strong, especially for Eryn, but now that she had found a moment of solace, the heartache was beginning to affect her resilient façade. She wanted to go home so badly. She wanted to feel her mother's arms around her and argue with Kristoph again.

"The hide was made from an alpaca. It's our softest." Samina continued to make light conversation. Liliana heard her ringing the cloth free of the excess water into a bowl on a nearby table.

"Unfortunately, the wounds must be cleaned. It's to prevent infection. Because, believe me, an infection would be much worse than the pain you're feeling now."

"Here, let me." The gruff voice came from Gabriel. "I'll tend to her."

He'd been told to wait outside of the tent while Samina attended Liliana's wounds, but he clearly hadn't listened.

Liliana's body immediately tensed upon hearing the voice. "I'd rather you didn't," she openly said to him.

Gabriel ignored her request. "Go," he commanded Samina.

When the woman was hesitant to leave, he reassured her by saying, "I won't hurt her. I promise. Now go."

Samina obeyed and quietly departed.

"Tell me if I'm using too much pressure," Gabriel spoke in a soft voice. He picked up the cloth Samina had been using from the bowl of water and rang it out. "The water is mixed with herbs, which should cool some of the stinging. Or so I heard Samina mention."

Liliana remained quiet as he cleansed her wounds.

"Does that hurt?" he asked as he lightly dabbed.

"No," Liliana answered. She didn't like that he was being so nice. It didn't seem to match up with the persona of a Constantin.

Very softly, he asked, "Why didn't you tell me, Lily?"

"Because you're a Constantin," Liliana answered honestly.

"You should have told me that when I first met you. That's probably why you were out in those woods in the first place, wasn't it?"

He decided to be just as honest. "Yes," he answered her. "There were men sent with orders to kill all abandoners. My brothers and I were at the top of their list."

"Why?"

Gabriel snorted. "There are several answers for your question, Lily."

Her body tensed as his cloth touched a very tender spot.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'll be fine."

She eventually relaxed again and he continued on. She seemed so different now, very calm and serene. It was so unexpected, especially after the fiery rage she'd directed towards Ralph earlier that day. "They killed my mother," he told her suddenly. He hadn't expected to share this with the girl. But it was too late to take it back now.

"Who did?" Liliana asked, confused.

"Salazar Bonjara. He was the reigning king at the time. He was just one of many corrupt Royals. Her death was the main reason I chose to abandon them."

He waited for her reaction. When she didn't say anything, he continued his story. "She was a good, decent, woman. She wanted to implement a more even disbursement of the wealth amongst the gypsy tribes. Salazar decided to shut her up by killing her off...he did it with poison. I watched as she choked on it."

Gabriel's voice was low, emotionless. But buried deep within, he felt a pang of the emotions he'd been tortured with as he watched his own mother die.

He suddenly wondered why he was wasting his time telling the gypsy girl. She wouldn't understand. She'd made up her mind to hate him.

After he was finished, Gabe set the cloth down and headed out of the tent. "I'll send Samira in to assist with your bandages," he said over his shoulder.

Later on that night, Liliana showed up in Gabriel's tent, surprising him completely. She carried a plate of food in her hands. Her complexion wasn't as pale and lifeless as it was earlier. The color was back in her cheeks. She appeared very calm and demure.

"Why do you not dine with the others?" she asked him curiously.

"I usually do."

She fidgeted for a moment before moving towards him. "I've brought you something to eat." She handed him the plate. "May I sit?"

Gabriel nodded. He didn't know what to make of her newfound easiness around him. She'd made it very clear earlier she wanted nothing to do with him. Carefully, she set the plate on the table, and then took a seat on the pillow across from him.

"I spoke with your brother, Dragos, over supper. He told me about your family histories. He told me more about your mother and how she died. I'm very sorry for your loss."

Gabriel shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

He watched her intensely. Apart from her apparent pity, she seemed nervous. He was suddenly very curious to find out what her reason was for being here.

"All my life, I've been told the Constantins are a band of murderers--"

Gabriel cut her off before she could tarnish his family's name. "Most of the deaths we've been accused of weren't our doing.

Though I'll admit I killed Bonjara. The bastard deserved to die."

Liliana merely nodded in understanding.

"Let me finish," she pleaded with him quietly. "As I was saying, all my life I've been told your family is a band of murderers...but I think I may have been very wrong. And I apologize for my misjudgment. I could see it in the way that Dragos's people adore him. And I know who you are, Gabriel. I know the kindness in your heart. Today, you only further proved it. But I let your name blind me and for that I am truly sorry."

He was taken aback by her sudden change of heart. He didn't even know if he deserved to hear this.

"Lady, I am not as good as you think. I have done things I'm ashamed of."

"Haven't we all?" She smiled and then let out a small sigh.

"And I think I've told you before that my name is Liliana."

Gabriel exhaled also. It was almost as if he'd been holding his breath ever since he'd lost the girl the first time. And now here she was, sitting across from him. He could breathe again.

"Remind me to thank Dragos later," Gabriel told her.

"For enlightening me with the truth?"

"Yes."

She looked as if she wanted to say something, but couldn't quite get the words out.

"Is there something else?" he asked curiously.

She bit her lip. "Yes, well, I want to ask you something." "I'm all ears."

"Dragos also mentioned you were looking for me. He said you spent months searching."

Gabriel nodded. "That's true. You saved me that night of the storm. I wanted to return the favor."

"Oh. . .I see."

"So what's your question?" he asked her.

She started to fidget again, twirling her wrists.

Despite himself, he chuckled at her nervousness. "Spit it out," he demanded.

She blushed, clearly embarrassed. Finally, she admitted, "I guess what I really want to know is. . .why did you bother to help me today? I deserved every lash. I was too proud to ask for your help because of what I thought you were."

Gabriel set his food aside and moved closer to Liliana. He took her fidgeting hands and pulled them into his own large ones, stilling her movements. Looking deeply into Liliana's sapphire eyes, he told her, "Because I wanted to change your mind."

"Why do you care what I think?"

His gray eyes searched hers. He paused, unsure of how to tell her what he needed to. Finally, he declared, "Because what you think matters. . .I believe your thoughts will matter for the rest of my life."

With that said, Gabriel gathered Liliana's face and hair between his hands and kissed her until she was breathless.

A newfound wonder spread over Liliana as she contemplated what Gabriel meant to her. All she was sure of was that he mattered to her, too. He mattered so much.

Part Three Awaken

"Not all those who wander are lost." - JRR Tolkien

TWENTY-FIVE

I awoke from the deepest slumber I'd ever experienced in my entire life.

For the first time ever, I needed to figure out *when* I was rather than *where* I was. The scent of the soft lavender sheets beneath me eventually led me to remember that I wasn't dreaming in the past anymore. I'd been transported back into the present.

Glancing at the alarm clock, which sat beside me on the bedside table, I could see the time 2:45 flashing in bright red numbers. I was sure it was p.m., rather than a.m. I wearily pushed myself off of the mattress and sat up in bed. I ran my fingers through my hair and discovered the long strands were still sticky from last night's hairspray. Trying to push past the haze of sleepiness surrounding me, I wondered why I still felt so exhausted.

An eerie feeling overwhelmed me as I fought through the lethargy. It was like I was a different person, waking up for the very first time. Well, maybe not different. But unequivocally more complete. Though I'd never lost a limb before, I'd bet anything that the return of my memories was akin to the feeling one gets when they receive a prosthetic. The feeling of detachment is no longer hauntingly present.

Thinking of the late hour again, I wondered why no one had woken me. But I guess I already knew the answer to that question. It was probably because they didn't dare to.

They all knew, too.

I eased out of bed, trying to avoid the rush of blood flooding to my head. It came anyway, imparting a dizzying nausea with each step I took. Fighting past it, I ambled to the bathroom. I removed my wrinkled gown from last night and made my way into the shower. My dull senses gradually began to awaken within the confines of the steamy water.

The memories weren't coming in at full-force anymore, mercifully. But they were still there, lingering in the background. . and my mind continued returning to them piece by piece.

While I showered, I came up with the theory. I wondered if all of my memories had somehow been restored while I slept last night. However, now I simply had a little more control over what I was thinking about. That would explain why I wasn't being bombarded with memory after memory. And after last night's onslaught, I was sincerely grateful for the slightest bit of control.

Once I was completely scrubbed clean and ten times more awake than I had been earlier, I went back into my bedroom to get dressed. It was only moments later that I heard a knock at the door. I quickly threw on the closest article of clothing to me, which was a pink sundress, and opened the door. It was Miriam, wearing a morose expression. I moved, allowing her to come inside.

I stood by the window quietly while I waited for her to speak.

She couldn't hide it. Her expression was as guilty as they come.

Clearing her throat, she finally said to me, "Gabe's been by several times this morning asking for you. I told him you were still sleeping. I didn't want to wake you."

I looked away from her, crossing my arms over my chest and staring out of the window.

"I expect you'll want some explanations," she continued. "And I think--"

"I don't want any explanations," I said. "I just want to be left alone."

As soon as I said it, I realized the truth within my own words. I honestly did want to be alone. The memories haunting me were more than enough company for the time being.

Miriam nodded, accepting that. "When you're ready to talk, we'll all be here for you, Lo."

I refused to meet her gaze. As far as I was concerned, she had lied to me. I was deeply hurt by Miriam. More than anyone else, I trusted and respected her. And now it seemed that she was keeping secrets, too. I simply waited for her to leave the room.

As soon as she did, I ran a brush through my hair and slipped on a pair of sandals. I grabbed my bag, stuffing it with a blanket, my Mp3 player and a pair of sunglasses.

I would quietly sneak out of the house. I really didn't want to run into anyone. Definitely not Gabe. I wasn't ready to speak with him. I didn't care if he had been by the house several times or a hundred times. As far as I was concerned, any explanation he could possibly give me would not change how I felt.

The beach was as good a place as any. Maybe the lull of the ocean would help still my constant memories.

While I was walking down the stairs, I ran into the last person I wanted to see. Annika.

Her eyes narrowed as soon as she noticed me. "Well, if it isn't the teenage home wrecker," she mumbled beneath her breath, but loud enough for me to hear her clearly. She turned to the side, giving me plenty of room to pass her. "By all means, go around me. And do me a favor while you're at it-- don't come back."

I really wasn't up for this confrontation. I only wanted to get away, from her, this house and everything. But as I started to pass Annika, something snapped inside of me and I changed my mind. I paused directly in front of her. We were at eye level, her face close to mine.

I met her repulsed stare and said exactly what was on my mind.

"I know you're hurting, Annika. But I really don't give a damn about you right now. I haven't home-wrecked anything. Gabe was mine for hundreds of years. Long before I ever knew you, before he ever knew you. In the grand scheme of things, you're the true home wrecker."

Her eyes grew wide. I knew she already knew what I told her, but I also knew it wasn't the same as hearing out loud and directly from me. Because I just made it real for her.

"What's wrong?" I asked, suddenly incensed with a growing rage. "You thought I would let you continue playing the victim? Well, I'm sorry to break the news to you, but you're not the victim here."

It seemed we were both surprised by my words. Infuriated tears began to swell in Annika's eyes. Through clenched teeth, she gritted out, "How can you not feel ashamed? Gabe was mine in *this* lifetime. He was supposed to be my husband, and he would have been, if you hadn't shown up. You've ruined *everything*."

I rolled my eyes. I knew I should stop, but I couldn't seem to get control over my temper. "It's not like I'm trying to stand in your way!" I shouted. "You and Gabe can go live happily ever after for all I care. So just leave me alone, and go get your man!"

I watched as a remote tear fell down the length of Annika's face.

Detached, she said in a small voice, "Well, obviously, I can't just 'go and get him,' as you so kindly pointed out to me. He doesn't want me anymore. . .not now that he has you again."

Instantly, I felt awful.

Horrible. Terrible. Wretched. Awful.

I wanted to crawl underneath a big rock and die.

God, why couldn't I just shut-up before getting carried away? I knew Annika was only looking for an outlet, someone to blame for her broken heart. And instead of being her scapegoat, I put my own hurt before hers.

She walked up the steps and away from me, a little more broken than before.

"Anni," I called. But, of course, she didn't answer.

It was probably for the best. I didn't know what I would say, anyway.

I groaned, wanting to kick myself. I was angry at the world right now. Yet I had still taken it out on Annika. And yeah, the things she'd done to me were malicious and completely spiteful. But if I had been in her shoes, and another girl had stolen Gabe away from me, I would have been pretty pissed too. I would have been broken-hearted, too.

Just like I was right now.

I swallowed as the realization dawned on me. No matter how good of an excuse he had, Gabe could never justify why he had chosen to forget about me. Nor could he ever explain why he had chosen to do that moving on with my cousin. I don't care how beautiful my memories of him were. He apparently was no longer the person I remembered him to be. I suppose several lifetimes could do that to a person.

I didn't make it out of the house before I realized Gabe would be waiting for me there. I saw his truck pulling up into the driveway just as I reached for the doorknob that led to the front patio. He must have seen me preparing to leave. His mind could follow my every movement if he wanted to. The thought was a little disturbing.

I found Miriam in the laundry room folding towels. She looked surprised to see me.

"Can I borrow your car?" I asked her.

Her eyes turned apprehensive. "Don't worry," I said, realizing the direction her thoughts were headed. "I'm not planning to flee."

"Can you promise me that?"

I nodded. "When and if I decide to leave, I'll let you know," I assured her. "And I certainly wouldn't take off in your car."

She moved towards the mail rack by the door and removed one of the keys from a ring. Before handing it to me, she asked, "If you're not leaving. . .then where are you going?"

Inhaling, I glanced out the nearby window, glimpsing Gabe's truck.

"Like I told you before, I just really want to be alone." I nodded my head in the direction of the window. She peered through the glass panels to view for herself. "Oh. . .I see."

She turned away from the window and back towards me now. "I understand, Lo. And like I told you before, we'll all be here when you're ready to talk."

I still wasn't sure if I even wanted to talk about this. But I nodded and took the key from her.

Gabe stood beside his truck. It was clear he had been waiting for me.

I ignored him. I walked directly past him and headed to Miriam's car.

"Lola," he called.

I continued to ignore him.

"Lola, I need to speak to you, dammit!" The frustration in his voice made me flinch.

I didn't turn around to face him, but over my shoulder, I said, "Do you really think anything has changed just because I have my memories back?"

"You need to let me explain!"

I unlocked the car door and opened it. Before getting inside, I said, "I don't feel like listening to explanations. I can barely look at you without a thousand flashing images entering my head. You can explain yourself all day to Annika if you like. But if you don't mind, I'd like to be left alone."

With that said, I got inside and slammed the door, pressing the lock button for good measure. Then I turned over the ignition and drove away before he had the chance to stop me. I needed to find somewhere his mind couldn't follow me to, somewhere more than a few miles away.

TWENTY-SIX

I sat very still and quiet for a long while. I remained sitting on the beach, staring out into the horizon, maybe for hours. I wasn't really sure how long I'd been sitting there. I watched as the dark blue water grew golden while the pink and amber rays of the setting sun melted into the ocean. For the first time over the course of the past few days, I finally felt a calmness settling in around me. It was immensely gratifying because it felt like I had been through a battle and back, continuously overwhelmed by thoughts, memories or emotions. So even if it didn't last for long, for the time being, I was happy to think of nothing.

Today was Thanksgiving. Miriam had probably just finished cooking. Right now she was probably setting out her best china on the dining room table that she never used. She may have even taken out the crystal glasses she kept hoarded in the back of the cabinets, just for this occasion. Afterwards, she would sit down with Annika and Dakota to eat, converse, laugh and give thanks. They would enjoy the rich, southern food loaded with carbs, sugars and fats; and therefore, Miriam only prepared the said food once per year.

It was how it was supposed to be. They were all together as a happy family. It was how it would have been, anyway, if I'd never shown up.

I'd been everywhere over the last few days. Or, at least it felt like it. I'd visited the aquarium and watched the brightly colored fish swim for hours. I went to the library, but couldn't focus enough to read anything. I just sat there, mindlessly staring at the pages of my book. Yesterday, I signed up for volunteering, hoping the work would help stop my mind from wandering. But Gabe was at the beach that day. Though he didn't approach me, I ended up leaving early. Before he had the chance to.

Because today was Thanksgiving, I hadn't known what to do with myself. I just knew I couldn't spend the day at the house. So I decided to spend the day at the beach, alone. I found a small patch of sand a few miles down from Miriam's house. The location was likely out of Gabe's mind's sight. But as the soft-hued twilight settled in, I instinctively knew he would come for me there.

I didn't attempt to elude him this time. I was simply too worn out. Besides, I had begun to feel foolish for thinking I could hide forever.

I heard him walking towards me from behind. He silently kneeled down next to me. I looked up at him to find he was wearing his work suit. The sight of him caused me to feel a tug at my heart; it was a feeling I suppose I had always felt each time he was near. I never understood what it meant before. Now that I had a better grasp on things, that feeling terrified me.

"How are you?" he asked in a low voice. He didn't seem angry at me for avoiding him. He only seemed concerned.

"I'm okay," I answered, my voice cracking because I hadn't spoken in so long.

He watched me for a few moments. I think he was trying to figure out if I truly meant it. It made me wonder if he saw me as broken or weak. I was suddenly feeling very exposed.

"I had to go in to the station for a few hours today," he mentioned. "But I'm officially off duty. I'm about to head back for dinner. Are you hungry?"

I forced myself to look him in the eyes. Though he seemed calm and reserved, I could see how much he was pleading with me. I began to realize I wasn't the only one in pain. Gabe was hurting too. And for the first time, I realized that this wasn't just my grandmother's neighbor or my cousin's ex-fiancé. This was a man who had once loved me, a man who would have died for me. Of course, I had no idea who he might be now. It had been lifetimes since our souls last met. But I had to acknowledge this was still the *only* man I ever loved.

I nodded in answer.

He held out his hand and helped me stand up. I dusted the grains of sand off of my jeans before following him to his truck. He opened the door for me just as I was reaching for the handle.

"Thanks," I said softly, before hopping up into the passenger seat. "I probably shouldn't go with you," I mentioned as he started up the engine. "Miriam asked me to eat dinner with her tonight. I feel like she believes it's sacrilegious or something to skip out on Thanksgiving dinner. She gave me a lot of hell for it this morning."

He looked over at me. "I think she'll understand," he said. "She knows there are some things you need to hear."

A long, drawn out sigh escaped my lips. "I guess they're better off. Annika wouldn't sit at the same table with me, anyway."

He flinched as soon as I mentioned Annika's name. "I'm sorry about that," he said. I could see he was being sincere. The moment turned slightly awkward, but he changed the subject by saying, "And anyway, Baro cooked a huge meal. You can eat dinner with my family. I'll call Miriam and explain. She'll understand."

After a few more moments of debating, I finally agreed. Gabe pulled his truck off of the beach and onto the road. "My family and I-we would all like to explain things to you. Well, at least those who knew you and knew what happened."

It took a moment for that to sink in, what he'd just said to me. "Wait, you mean some of your siblings knew me? Which ones?"

"Rex and Baro. Cam and Molly never met you before this life."

"So why do Rex and Baro want to explain anything to me?" I asked, confused. "Why can't you just tell me?"

In my eyes, the only person who had any amount of explaining to do was Gabe, not that it would make things right or that I would feel any differently. But I definitely didn't see how his brothers fit into this.

"They want to make sure things are explained in a way that doesn't sabotage you. . .and others."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

Gabe sighed. "They don't trust me to tell you what needs to be said. If they had their way, nothing would be said to you at all." His tone lowered and he sounded almost bitter. "If they had their way, I would just let you go on living your life believing that I wanted you to forget me. That I didn't want you to ever remember."

"Why would they want that?"

"Because the implications of telling you. . ." Gabe paused. "I shouldn't say any more until we're all together. They're too afraid I'll mess it up."

I was entirely too confused by this conversation, but I decided to accept it for now. I figured I'd know soon enough what the big deal was, anyway.

Although it had taken me nearly two hours to walk to this beach, the drive home only took about ten minutes. We both remained quiet for the rest of the way.

I was suddenly feeling famished. After thinking about it, I realized I hadn't actually eaten much lately. My hollow stomach grumbled at the thought of food.

After pulling into the enormous driveway, Gabe parked directly in front of the house and walked around his truck to open my door for me. It was strange, the things I noticed about him that never seemed to change throughout the span of time. Almost instantly, hundreds of different images flashed through my mind of Gabe opening doors for me, pulling out chairs for me, carrying me over rain puddles. I supposed he'd always been chivalrous; it wasn't just a façade.

He offered me his hand to help me down and I took it. But he didn't let go after I was out of the truck. He continued holding my hand, leading me around the circular driveway and towards the entryway of his home. As we walked, I eyed my small hand enwrapped in his large one. It looked like it belonged there. Uncomfortably, I pushed the thought aside.

Molly opened the door before Gabe could put his key into the lock. She wore a bright smile, but as soon as she caught sight of me, her expression soured and her shoulders drooped.

After a long groan, she asked, "Why'd you have to bring her with you?"

She didn't wait for Gabe's answer. I figured her question was rhetorical, anyway. Instead, she simply walked away, leaving us standing alone in the foyer.

Gabe met my uneasy gaze. "Don't worry about her," he said reassuringly. "Moll's just being a brat because she's friends with Anni."

"I gathered that much, thanks."

"She doesn't know half of what's going on, Lo."

"Whatever she knows is still more than I do," I pointed out. Before he had a chance to respond, Cam entered the room.

"Lola, what's up?" He grinned. "Come to join us for dinner?"

I smiled, relieved to see a friendly face. And he only made me feel more at ease by enveloping me in a bear hug as soon as he reached me.

Gabe coughed after a few seconds. "Cam, I need you to go get Baro and Rex. Tell them to meet us in the living room."

"Sure thing," he said. "But this conversation better not take all night. I've been helping Baro cook for the last three hours and I'm starving."

As soon as Cam departed, Gabe tugged me along to the living room. "Sit," he instructed, motioning me towards the sofa. "This might take a while and it's probably going to be confusing."

"I don't think I can bear any more confusion."

"Well, at least my brothers will do a better job of explaining than I could. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"You make all of this sound so serious,"

"That's because it is serious, Lola."

I took a seat, sinking into the plush leather of the sofa. My eyes wandered over the countless mosaics as we waited, admiring the tiles and designs.

I couldn't fathom anything involving myself that could be so serious and so it was hard for me to take it as seriously as Gabe did. Granted, I didn't have any gypsy sight or intuition and I couldn't read a palm to save my life. All in all, I didn't have anything special to offer. Therefore, the possibility of something hidden in my mind that was worth all this trouble was unimaginable.

Gabe would have the answers. My gaze drifted over the mosaics and back to him. He'd remained standing by the window. He was looming over the glass panes, staring out into night sky. He seemed to be on edge.

"Lola Moori, I have sincerely missed you, draga."

Baro Constantin walked into the room, Rex Constantin following not far behind him. I stood as Baro neared me. He towered over me, dwarfing me with his height. His size was intimidating. I offered him my hand to shake. He took it, but then pulled me into an embrace. Baro hugged me tightly, almost as if he'd known me forever. But then I guess he had known me forever.

Baro stepped back and looked me over. "I swear you become lovelier with each lifetime you surpass."

I smiled, charmed by the twinkle in his resilient gray eyes.

Although he was massive, Baro's eyes seemed friendly and unthreatening. Either that, or perhaps maybe he was simply familiar to me.

"Thank you," I said in response to his compliment. Baro stepped back and Rex approached me now, slowly. "Hello again, Lola," he greeted me quietly.

It surprised me to discover how incredibly handsome Rex Constantin was. Most people only referred to him as callous or cold. That could be true; he certainly didn't seem very friendly, but I couldn't help comparing Rex to Gabe. More than any of his siblings, Rex resembled Gabe the most. There was one exception, however. Rex was the first Contantin I'd noticed with eyes a different color than gray. Instead, his eyes were a dark amber hue.

"Of course, you don't remember me or Rex, do you?" Baro asked.

I looked over both of them in contemplation, trying to distinguish either of them from my recently returned memories.

Baro shook his head. "You won't be able to recognize either of us that way. Most people naturally look for similarities in appearance in order to identify someone. But gypsies are an internal species. They look for similarities through the mind's sight. You have to look for the mannerisms, the way we hold ourselves. Look at the auras surrounding our heads, the stories within our eyes. Now try seeing him from your mind. Come here." Baro reached for my arm and pulled me directly in front of Rex.

"Close your eyes," he told me. "Don't even look at him. Instead use your mind's sight and get the feel of *who* he is.",.

I heard Gabe's voice in the background saying, "She's not ready for this, Bar."

"Shut up, Gabe," he ordered.

Suddenly, Baro's voice was behind me now. "Who is the man who stands before you, Lola? What do you feel when you're near him, what energy surrounds him? Open your eyes now."

I opened my eyes, meeting Rex's gaze. I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary to happen. But suddenly an image of a soldier flashed before my eyes. Or maybe nobility? As quickly as it came, it departed. I tried searching for something more afterwards. And then several images flashed through my mind.

I remembered there was a woman who had scarred Rex for eternity. I could sense this woman was the cause of his bitterness and distrustful nature.

A distant phrase filled my head. "I'll always hold a deep respect for you, Liliana Moori. You're one of few women who will ever hear me say that."

I shivered, feeling a spark of recognition. I looked over Rex, remembering who he was. We hadn't always liked each other; I instinctively knew this. At one time, we each formed opinions of one another based on the wrong impressions. For a long time, I had detested this man entirely. But my opinion of him changed, somehow. I began to understand him and love him like he was my own family.

"Stefan," I breathed, the name filling my mind.

Baro patted me on the back, almost knocking me over. "Well done, draga."

I watched as a flicker of emotion sparked within Rex's eyes. I knew he would never be one to offer affection. But I also knew that despite his hardened exterior, he needed it.

I hugged him tightly. He stiffened for a moment, but eventually accepted my embrace. He hugged me back, saying, "I've also missed you."

I turned around, looking at Baro. "And I know you as Dragos," I said, smiling.

He made a little bow before me. "Very good. However, I always hated that name. Baro suits me better, don't you think?"

I heard Rex mumble under his breath, "Arrogant peacock."

Baro only grinned. "It's taken from the word *barosan*," Baro explained in an aside to me.

"Ah, I see." I actually thought Baro did encompass the qualities of a natural leader. I could very easily picture him at the head of a tribe. And then I had another image appear before me of Baro as a real *barosan*. In the image, Baro gave out orders and wore the traditional red sash around the waist of his pants, which represented leadership.

"This is so freaky," I said to no one in particular. "I remember some things, but I don't remember everything. I just *know* that I know both of you. And I also know what kind of people you are."

"Then. . .you do not have all your memories yet?" Baro asked in a tentative voice.

"It's strange. I believe I do have them, but they?re all tucked away, as if each were a folder within a filing cabinet. When something triggers a memory, one of the folders is withdrawn and I begin to look through the file, remembering more and more."

Baro nodded. "Soon it will become easier. Soon you will have all of your memories at hand. And that is what we must speak to you about tonight." Baro paused, sighing. "It will be difficult to explain, I fear."

I sat back down on the sofa. Baro and Rex sat across from me in separate chairs.

Gabe remained by the window, a solemn expression still occupying his face.

"What is it that everyone is so afraid of?" I prepared myself to listen and be open to whatever they had to say.

Baro began speaking, his voice lulling into that of a storyteller. "It was a very long time ago when it happened. Unfortunately, a curse was placed upon your memories, hindering you of all capabilities of remembering anything about your past lives."

"A curse?" I asked, surprised. The possibility had never even occurred to me. There were so few gypsies who could perform curses, much less perform a curse that lasted the span of several lifetimes. "Who would do that to me?"

Baro and Rex glanced at each other for a moment before Baro decided to speak again. "I suppose it will do no harm to tell you at this point. It was Zetta Moori who cursed you, under your father's orders, of course."

Bewilderment swept over me as I thought of my loving aunt. "Auntie Zetta would never do anything to hurt me," I said.

"She didn't do it to hurt you, draga," Baro insisted. "She did it to keep you safe."

"I don't understand."

"I know. And I'll try my best to make sense of it. But I must warn you now that I won't be able to answer all of your questions. There are some things that simply cannot be said aloud to you. Can you accept this, Lola?"

I nodded. "Just tell me what you can."

"Zetta is one of the only people who could perform a curse that strong. It is in your makeup to remember your past lives. The *Roms* have had this ability for centuries. She was taking something away from you that went against your very own nature. It was the reason

she stayed close to you, to keep the curse strong." Baro paused, choosing his next words very carefully. Finally, he said, "She kept your memories from you because there is something hidden within your mind, something that *must* stay hidden."

"A hidden memory?"

"Yes."

"But why must it stay hidden?"

He paused again, searching for the right words. "Because... once it is unleashed, the mind readers will be able to listen. They will be able to know what you know. And should those memories ever come to light, God help us all. Especially you, Lola. Because even if the best mind readers can't pick your brain, for all of the details they need, you will still become the greatest threat to many and in danger from those who think they can use you.

"If people know what's inside your mind, you will be undoubtedly captured, tortured even, in order to release what you know. And believe me, if what you know gets out, it's not just you who will be in trouble. We will all be in great danger. In fact, the whole damned world would be in peril."

I stared at Baro blankly. "Well, that was quite a mouthful," I mentioned a few moments later. And then as what he said started to sink in more, my voice became a little whiny as I asked him, "But why do I have to keep whatever this thing is hidden? Why can't someone else hide it in their mind?"

"Your mind is not a safe deposit box, Lola," Baro told me. "We can't just take out what doesn't belong there. It's a memory. It's your

memory, nonetheless. And unfortunately, you were the one who was chosen for this."

"Baro," Rex grumbled.

"Damn," Baro muttered. "I didn't mean to touch on that subject."

"What do you mean chosen?" I asked.

"That is one of the questions I cannot answer, Lola."

"Why?"

"Because the answer may lead to your remembrance, and I will *not* be the cause of the horrific aftermath, which would undoubtedly ensue."

It was all so completely and utterly frustrating. They were telling me not to remember, but couldn't explain why-because it might bring about my remembering. It was a vicious cycle, if there ever was one. Though it shamed me, I really wanted to know whatever it was they knew. A foggy blanket covered my mind. It was an oppressive and suffocating thing. I desperately wished I could remove it and allow my memories to crystalize into perspective. It was like fighting to breathe again.

"Okay, fine. I think I get it," I said. I turned to face Gabe, calling him out with my expression. He turned to me, knowing that I was about to speak directly to him. "But what does all this have to do with *you*?"

Within that one question, there were several more. At the same time, I was asking him, Why did you not want me to remember you?

Why did you disappear for so many lifetimes? And how could you possibly ask my cousin to marry you?

"I had to leave you," he told me softly.

"Gabe, that's enough" Rex said in a warning tone.

Gabe glared at his brother. "Give it a rest, Rex. She's already remembered me. There's nothing more we can do to stop it from happening."

"Yes, but we can stop how quickly she remembers."

"You're being ridiculous."

"And you're being a fool!" Rex growled.

"Settle down, Rex," Baro commanded his brother. His booming voice echoed throughout the large room. It was clear that Baro was the voice of authority within this household. Rex obeyed, though reluctantly. He sat back in his chair, and kept his mouth closed. He didn't look happy about it, either.

"Go ahead, Gabe," Baro allowed. "Just try to be careful of how you choose your words."

Gabe nodded and then moved closer to where I sat. He kneeled down to my eye level next to the sofa. "Do you know why your memories are coming back, Lo?"

I shook my head.

Gabe reached for my hand, taking it in his. "Well, for one thing, your aunt isn't near you, so the curse is wearing off. But it's also because when you're near me. . .it all comes back to you." He looked down at my hand sadly. "You remember me and then you remember everything."

He looked up, his eyes imploring mine, with so much emotion reflecting through. "I tried to be with you even after your memories were taken away. But it didn't work. For some reason, I make you remember everything. . .you were killed in that life, Lo. You committed suicide."

My jaw dropped. I couldn't believe what he was telling me. "I don't believe in suicide," I said to him. "It's a coward's way out."

"I know," he sighed. "That's when I realized how important this secret is for you, too. You gave your own life to keep it. And when you died, I lost everything."

A scene began to shape itself in my head. I was standing on a rocky cliff overhanging the ocean. Vigorous waves crashed loudly below. I could almost taste the salty mist and hear the roar of the waves as if I had been transported back to that place and time.

I took one step closer, and then one more.

They weren't far behind me. I knew it was now or never. If they caught me, all would be lost forever. . .I closed my eyes. I can do this, I thought to myself. But I was so afraid. I was afraid of the pain. And I was even more afraid of. . .of not being with him anymore. A lone tear escaped my lashes and fell across my cheek.

I whispered to the moonlit sky, "I love you, Gabriel."

I heard them approaching. I could see their torches lit only a mere fifty feet away. They could never get to me now. They could never have what wasn't theirs to take.

One step more upon the ground, and then another in open air.

And then I simply fell. The air enveloped me as I rushed downwards,
to my death.

I gasped as the images around me faded, bringing me back to the present. "It's true!" I screamed. "My God, it's true!"

Suddenly, I was back in the Constantins' living room, screaming at the top of my lungs.

Everyone stood up at once. Except for Gabe. He was at my side in a second, pulling me onto his lap. He stroked my hair, attempting to comfort me. "It's okay, my love. You're okay." Dismally, I touched my cheek, feeling the wet tear that had escaped. I wasn't sure how that happened. I didn't remember crying, except during the vision.

"What did you remember?" Baro asked, alarmed.

I felt Gabe's muscles tense at my side. "Give her a damned moment, Bar."

As I struggled to stifle my inner turmoil, I announced to everyone, "There's no need to panic. I didn't remember whatever it is that you people don't want me remembering."

Everyone's expressions transformed into relief, including Gabe's. I continued by telling them, "I think I saw myself jumping off a cliff."

An uneasy silence filled the room. "It felt so real, so intense," I explained. "It was like I was there again."

Gabe held me closer to him now. I began to realize how nice his encompassing warmth felt around me. I felt safe and protected. It had never occurred to me that I hadn't felt safe before.

Almost immediately, I forced myself to move away from him. I didn't care if I happened to be madly in love with Gabe or if he was my soul mate from many lifetimes ago. This was a different life. And in this life, I refused to allow myself to grow dependent on anyone's comfort. Especially comfort from someone who had broken my heart.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Gabe reached for me, tilting my chin so I would face him. "Annika was a means to move on. I spent several lifetimes mourning the loss of you."

Baro spoke now. "Truthfully, we all pushed him into that wedding with Anni. We didn't do it to spite you, Lola. Because Rex and I, we love you like our own flesh and blood. We just wanted Gabe to be happy. I guess we never realized he couldn't be happy without you."

I swallowed back any tears that had been forming. "I understand," I said softly, trying to keep my voice from breaking.

It was true. I completely understood that Gabe's family cared about him and wanted him to move on. I didn't resent them for that. And now. . .I guess I didn't even resent Gabe anymore for trying. I wanted him to be happy. But still, it just hurt *so* much.

Part of the hurt stemmed from knowing that I'd never been able to move on. I don't think I even tried. I may not have all of my memories back, but I knew my heart had never belonged to anyone but Gabe. I couldn't even imagine there being anyone else who I

could have been with after loving Gabe with so much of my soul. And it was tearing me apart that he had attempted to move on with Annika.

But if I was being completely honest with myself, I'd admit that the real hurt came from knowing how perfect Annika was. She was good and kind, so much better than I could ever be. I was nothing but a common thief, a liar and a dishonorable daughter. My beauty only ran skin deep, but Annika was beautiful inside and out. I could never compare to her.

"You seem distant. Tell me what you're thinking," Gabe pleaded quietly.

I met his sparkling gray eyes, noting the concerned lines in his face. "Nothing," I lied. "I'm just digesting everything."

Another troubled sigh sounded from Baro. "There's more," he stated.

"I know what you're getting at," Gabe said to his brother angrily. "And don't you think this is enough for tonight?"

"I'm not trying to frighten her, Gabe. But she needs to know."

"Just say it," I told them both. "I can handle it."

Gabe's expression hardened. He crossed his arms over his chest grudgingly. "Go on," he said, allowing Baro to continue.

"Now that your memories are coming back, this situation has become a little dire."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There are people out there, other gypsies, who know who you are. The best mind readers will be on the lookout for your thoughts and memories. Once they've picked up your. . .frequency, if you will,

we are going to have trouble. I believe there will be those who come looking for you in order to capture you. . .Lola, what I'm trying to say is: Now that some of your memories have been exposed, your very life is at stake."

TWENTY-SEVEN

It turned out Baro was a great cook. He prepared several traditional dishes from Romania, some of which I hadn't tasted in years. He filled the table with *saramura*, stuffed peppers, assorted sausages, cabbage rolls and several soups and stews. And since Baro now considered himself an American, he even baked a turkey.

Everything I tasted was so incredibly delicious. The food was reminiscent of Redwood Forest, the gathering point for all gypsies. Regrettably, there had been no one in our troupe who enjoyed cooking very much and so I didn't often come across the chance to enjoy a meal like this. Since the performers were our cover and everyone else was talented in other areas, (robbery being the main area of expertise), we didn't have time for cooking and we ate on the road more often than not. Sometimes, it could be enjoyable. We were able to try a lot of foods from various cultures. But Baro's meal simply beat out all the rest.

Everyone at the table mostly just ate over dinner, with very light conversation. Thankfully, Molly didn't speak to me. In fact, she did her best to ignore me, pretending like I wasn't even in the room. I was fine with it. I wasn't up to trading barbs with her, anyway.

I was still reflecting on everything Baro had said to me earlier, wondering what danger lay in my future now that my memories were coming back. I desperately wished I could speak with Zetta. I was

beginning to realize how much I had relied on her wisdom over the years. It was unsettling, not knowing what my future held. What if I didn't even have a future now?

I felt Gabe's hand reach for mine underneath the table. I turned to him, noticing his expression was as worried as my own.

"Are you okay?" he whispered so that no one else would hear. Everyone else's attention was currently turned to Cam, listening as he gave his opinions about the upcoming presidential elections.

"I'm fine," I replied. I gave a small smile, trying to prove it.

"I was thinking that maybe you could move into the house. You know, for added protection. We have four empty bedrooms here and you can have your pick."

I shook my head. "Don't be ridiculous," I told him. "I'm only next door and within *your* line of vision."

He didn't seem to approve of my reply, and told me so. "It's still not close enough."

"I'll be fine," I assured him. "Besides, I don't think we shouldn't worry until I start remembering everything."

He sighed, a heavy sound. "I saw what happened last time, Lo. I don't want to take chances this time around. I can't lose you again."

I felt something flutter within the pit of my stomach. Butterflies, I'd heard it called that before. His determination to keep me and that fire growing within his typically cool eyes simply won me over.

And that's when I knew it couldn't go any farther than this. Gabe and I would never be together again. Sadly, I was steadily realizing that maybe we were never meant to.

I stared at him gloomily. He was truly beautiful. My eyes wandered over the strong lines of his jaw, his straight nose, his absorbing eyes. . .I wondered if this was the last chance I would ever have to view him so candidly.

After dinner, Baro invited me to play a game of poker with the rest of the family. I told him I was tired and I should probably go home. I hugged everyone goodbye, with the exception of Molly, and then Gabe walked me back to Miriam's house.

We were both quiet as we walked along the beach. Our sandals sank into the silky sand, causing the walk to take longer than if we had chosen to stroll along the grass. Gabe held my hand securely in his. Again, I found myself wondering if it belonged there.

"Gabe, there's something I need to say to you."

He stopped, turning to face me. "What is it?" he asked.

"I want you to marry Annika."

There. I said it.

The words were out of my mouth and I could never take them back.

A flash of pain struck in his gaze, but it quickly disappeared, overshadowed by something else. I couldn't read him. I had no idea what he was thinking.

Suddenly, Gabe grasped both of my arms and drew me towards him. His hands ran up the sides of my arms until he reached my neck. Then he drew me completely against him, tilting me backwards. A tingling sensation ran up the length of my spine, sending chills over my entire body.

I began to panic.

Was he about to kiss me? Did I even want him to kiss me? This was not exactly what I'd anticipated might happen after telling Gabe that I wanted him to marry Annika.

With the gentlest touch, Gabe traced a finger across my jaw and then along my bottom lip. The warmth of his touch lingered along my skin even after he stopped.

"Tell me," his voice was ragged as he whispered in my ear.

"How could you possibly want something like that?"

"I umm. . ." My train of thought was shattered.

The closeness of him, that clean, citrusy scent, his warmth, his hand across my back that kept me from falling- I didn't want to break away from any of it.

"Do you remember what it was like when we touched like this? Do you remember the fire that ignited between us?"

Though I could hear his words, I couldn't quite grasp what he was saying. He never did give me the chance to answer, anyway. The next thing I knew, he was leaning over me, his warm lips lightly touching mine. Touching quickly became tasting, and suddenly, it felt as if he were absorbing me completely.

He couldn't get close enough, and his hands became disheveled into my hair as he tried to pull me even closer to him. Gently, he prodded my lips open, surprising me for a split second by the way he invaded my mouth. I wasn't sure exactly when I became participatory in the kiss, but I began feeling an urgency that matched his. I clung to

his arms, feeling the strong muscles beneath my grip, and matched his fervor with my own lips and tongue.

This must be passion, I thought. And at that exact moment (because I had allowed room for thought in my muddled brain), I realized this should definitely *not* be happening. Before I lost my mind completely, I lifted my hands to the panes of Gabe's chest and shoved him with all my might.

He hardly even swayed. Annoyingly, he didn't even lose his footing. I think he only pulled away because I had confused him with my pushing.

"You can't possibly tell me to marry someone else after experiencing *that*," Gabe declared heatedly, We were both breathing heavily. "And you can't tell me you don't love me," he added. "Because I know you do."

I compelled myself to square my shoulders and stand my ground. As much as I hated this, I resolved to get through it.

"I do want you to marry Annika," I said resolutely. "This was a mistake. I should have never come here. My memories wouldn't have started to come back if I hadn't, and from the way everyone describes it, I've put the world in peril because of my remembering. So whatever this is, it stops now."

He shook his head, refusing to believe what I was telling him. "Lola, I can protect you. We'll find a way to make it through this. I swear it to you."

"No," I breathed.

I swallowed. I think I knew the words to say that would make him listen to me, but I was afraid of saying them- because it would be flat-out lying. But I was good at lying. It wasn't like I hadn't done it a million times before.

So why was it so hard to do it this time?

"Lola," he pleaded with me. "I was lost without you. And I know you were miserable without me, too. Why are you doing this?"

For you, I wished I could say. So you won't be unhappy anymore. And because Annika deserves you much more than I do.

But instead, I lied to him. "Because I don't want it to be like the last time, Gabe. I don't want to commit suicide and I don't want to put everyone else at risk. If we just stop now, maybe the things I'm not supposed to remember will never come back to me. I'll go back to Zetta and let her curse me again. I'll stay near her, and hope it stays powerful. That way, no one's lives are at stake, including mine."

I bit my lip, waiting for his reaction. I wondered whether or not he would buy it.

And then I saw the pain building in his eyes again. His expression was a stony mask, but I could see the truth there. I had hurt him. And more than anything else, I knew he wouldn't risk hurting me.

My success caused me no overwhelming joy. Because any amount of agony he was feeling right now, I was feeling it, too.

"Okay," he said. "I get it. I don't want to risk your life."

Heavy tears grew in my eyes, fogging my vision. I cast my head downwards, trying not to let him see if they happened to spill.

"So we'll stay away from each other?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'll stay away from you." His voice was broken, dead. My tears started to fall, but the darkness of the night sky hid the evidence.

And besides, Gabe wouldn't be able to see me cry. He had already started walking away from me. I guess he had meant what he said.

TWENTY-EIGHT

"You're not eating."

I scowled to let Cam know just how obnoxiously obvious he was being. It was lunchtime and my peanut butter and jelly sandwich sat in front of me, untouched. But so what if I wasn't hungry? It's not like it happened very often.

"I just thought I'd point it out," he said, shrugging. "There's no reason to get so moody about it. Sheesh." Though his voice remained very even and monotone, I could hear the underlying sarcasm in it.

Annoyed at this point, I looked away from Cam, hoping he would change the subject. I don't know why I continued to hang out with him at school. He reminded me too much of his brother, and I really would prefer not to be reminded.

"You know, not eating is a common sign of depression."

"I'm not depressed," I told him.

"Did you know that depression is often a result of a broken heart? Apparently, it happens a lot. People write songs about it and stuff."

"Cam," I stated emphatically. "Drop it."

He sighed, acting as if he were annoyed also. "Fine, whatever."

A few moments passed awkwardly before Cam asked me, "So are you going to eat that?"

I pushed the sandwich toward him. "Take it."

Cam swooped up my food like a vulcher and grinned cheerfully.

The bell rang not long after he finished eating.

"Come on," he said. "I'll walk you to class."

Honestly, I didn't even feel like going. And next period was biology, one of my favorite subjects. But I really just felt like curling up in my bed, with my grandmother's lavender-scented sheets surrounding me, drifting off to a blissful slumber.

I ended up letting Cam walk me to class, regrettably.

"Hey." He smiled as we came to a stop in front of the classroom door. I looked up at him, watching as his gray eyes sparkled. Just like Gabe's beautiful gray eyes.

Great. Another freaking reminder.

"Cheer up. Christmas break is coming soon and we'll be off for two whole weeks."

He made a good point. I could look forward to two weeks of peaceful, uninterrupted hibernation. It was the best news I got all day.

"Thanks. See you later."

Biology dragged by. There were no labs today and the professor lectured the entire hour. Mostly, I just tuned him out and stared at the clock as it ticked on and on, until it finally reached my beloved three p.m. And then the bell rang. I thought it may have been the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard in my life.

I grabbed my satchel and ran out the door. Sometimes I let Cam drive me home, but today I felt like walking. Knowing he'd probably talk me into letting him drive me, I hurried to flee the campus before I ran into him.

It wasn't a long walk to Miriam's house from the academy, anyway. Only about twenty minutes if I power walked. I plugged my earphones in, letting the sound of the loud music tune out the world around me entirely. It wasn't freezing, but there was a slight chill in the air, causing me to shiver. I pulled my jacket from my bag and slipped it on. The jacket was thin and had a hood, which I pulled up and over my head in case Cam drove by.

I'd been walking for maybe ten minutes before I decided to change my Ipod to a different play list. I slowed my step so I could read the display.

However, the steely arms that grabbed ahold of me and wrapped around my mouth were unexpected.

I started to scream, but the noise was only a small, muffled sound because an itchy burlap bag was thrown over my head. I couldn't see anything through the scratchy material. My world had transformed into an inky darkness.

Fear unfolded inside of me, and it was quickly growing by the moment. I kicked and wrestled with all my might from inside of the bag, but it was no use. I felt myself being tossed up and then thrown hard against the man's shoulder. The impact knocked the air out of me.

There was nothing more I could do. The more I struggled, the harder it became to breathe. I was terrified I might suffocate.

It wasn't long before I heard the clicking of a key unlocking a car door. . .and then it sounded like a trunk was popped open. Feeling myself being tossed inside of the trunk, I gasped as I hit the

floorboard. I wondered where I was being taken. It was absolutely terrifying, of that there was no doubt. But even more so, I couldn't help being enormously curious. I wanted to know exactly why I had been trussed up and thrown into the trunk of a car.

Apparently, whoever had abducted me hadn't planned on taking me very far, because it was only about a fifteen minute ride to their destination. The vehicle's engine suddenly fell silent and I could hear the driver shutting his car door. Followed by this, I heard the sound of footsteps clicking across a cement ground. The trunk popped open and the man dragged me upwards, his arms cutting into my waist painfully. He carried me again. A squeaky door soon opened. I listened to the sound of my abductor's boots hitting against a hollow floor. We must have entered inside of wherever that door led.

Once inside, I felt the weight shifting beneath me, as if we were headed upstairs. A few more doors opened and closed.

Eventually, I was dropped onto a cold, hard ground. However, it was a few more moments before the bag finally came off of my head. As soon as it did, the smell of dust and grime instantly hit my nostrils. I looked around in the dark, attempting to view the man who had accosted me. No features came into play until a match was abruptly lit.

The man was glaring at me. . .with green eyes that were filled with a vengeful fury. I watched as his psychotic eyes subdued into a smug gaze.

I couldn't find my voice for a long while. Every time I tried to speak, only a slight breath of air escaped my mouth. Without any

explanation, my abductor pulled me against some sort of column.

There, he began tying me up with a thick band of coarse rope. I couldn't move afterwards. The bindings were too tight. It didn't look like I would be getting out of them any time soon.

Mustering up the little breath and courage I possessed, I whispered, "What are you planning to do with me?"

He didn't give me an answer. He didn't even look me in the eyes. The moment after he made sure the rope was secure, he left the room. The door slammed behind him, creating a resonating echo throughout the hollow space.

Oh God, my mind screamed. Could he really have just left me here with no explanation of any sort? And in the middle of. . .who knows where!

As soon as I heard the sound of a car driving away, I began to struggle against the rope. I tried to find any loose knot that could be undone, but the knot had been tied with too much strength. There was no way I was getting out of the hold. And the more I continued struggling, the tighter and more painful the rope became against my body.

Later, I tried screaming. And I continued to scream for what seemed like hours. But all my efforts were a waste of breath. I was probably somewhere in the middle of the woods, for all I knew. If that was the case, I would never be heard.

When was the giant man coming back for me? And what would he do to me when he got back?

I swallowed. I couldn't remember being this frightened, ever. The not knowing part made matters ten times worse. I couldn't even escape the terror through the quiet escape sleep would bring. As hard as I willed myself to fall asleep, I was too anxious. Not to mention I was severely uncomfortable due to the hard post to which my back was secured. All I could do was worry and contemplate for the rest of the night, making myself sick with panic.

I remembered Zetta's lullaby and began to quietly sing. I was hoarse from screaming and I could barely muster the words. My voice seemed...broken. Anyway, it certainly wasn't enough to put me to sleep. But the familiarity of the lullaby did bring a small form of a hazy calmness to this horrifying nightmare I, was currently living in. It was something, at least.

TWENTY-NINE

"My darling, Lily. It's been much too long."

I was simply too tired to mince words with the strange, beautiful woman standing before me and so I was decidedly blunt. "My name is Lola. And I've never met you before."

Her name was Natasha. She'd announced it before she walked in by shouting, "Darling, it's *me*, Natasha!" She'd said it like she'd arrived for afternoon tea or something. And just like that, she expected me to know who she was, like she was a long, lost pal of mine. As a gesture of our apparent estranged friendship, she ordered her ruffian lackey to untie me. I was allowed to sit in an actual chair, thank God.

The lackey was the same man who'd brought me here last night. He was a massive bulk of muscle with blonde hair, green eyes and rough, patchy skin. And he was just as scary in the light as he was in the dark.

"This is no way to treat a guest, Gorge," Natasha scolded him.

In a bizarre kind of way she reminded me of the Natasha from Rocky and Bullwinkle. The more I thought about it, the more I noticed that the two Natashas were eerily similar. Both had pale skin with long, dark hair, both extremely skinny, and both with Russian accents. It was really, really weird. Or maybe I was just overly tired

and my mind was playing tricks on me. Either way, I was slightly entertained by her, underneath the constant state of fear and fatigue.

So now I was sitting in a cold, hard metal chair (one step up from being tied up to the pole, I supposed) and I had this Natasha chick acting as if we were long, lost buddies. Then there was Gorge, who was still staring at me like he wanted to crush me in two.

It didn't help that I was about to pass out from exhaustion. I simply wasn't functioning enough to deal with my abduction at the moment

"No, we've never met. . .in this life, anyway," Natasha finally spoke again. She paced the room, slowly, hovering above where I sat in my chair. *Ahh, so she's a fellow Rom*, I gathered before my eyes started drooping. I didn't know why, but this information put me more at ease. I figured it was simply a relief I wasn't being held hostage by some sick, psycho killer. Just more gypsies. I could handle gypsies.

Since there was a little sunlight streaming in from the room's one window, I could make out more of my surroundings, not that there were very many. The room was empty, save for the pole, and now my chair. I noticed the floors were made of a commercial carpet. Probably an abandoned office building of some kind. I racked my brain, trying to remember if there were any uninhabited office buildings I'd noticed before. But my mind came up blank for any immediate possibilities. Most likely, I was too tired to think clearly.

"So. . .Lola." Natasha paused to smile, displaying a set of jagged teeth. "I like that name better. It suits you. Anyway, m'dear, Do you know why you're here?"

"There's something in my memories that you want." I didn't even think twice about playing dumb. I was simply too worn out to give her any bull.

"Good girl," she said. "See, Gorge? And you thought she'd be difficult."

Gorge didn't utter a word. He stayed in the corner of the room, cast in a stony silence. Natasha turned her attention back to me now, flipping her long, dark hair in a column over her shoulder.

"So where is it, Lola?" she asked.

"Where is what?"

Natasha frowned. "Now, I thought you were going to be a good girl for us. Just tell me where it is and we'll let you live. It's as simple as that."

I blinked. I decided I didn't really care about living. If they would just let me sleep, I'd tell them anything they wanted to know.

"Tell me what you're talking about," I yawned. "I certainly can't figure out what 'it' means, now can I?"

"Fine." She smiled tightly. "To clarify for you, I'm referring to the oracle. Otherwise known as the crystal primus. So...where the hell is it?"

I blinked once again. Was this lady serious? Was she coming to me about a crystal ball? This had to be a joke.

I wondered if this was what Baro had been referring to during Thanksgiving dinner. Did I hide some crystal ball to make sure that no one else knew where it was? Could my own family have gone to such lengths, cursing me even, just to keep it hidden? It was highly unlikely. I just couldn't imagine this all being about some stupid crystal ball.

"I'm waiting, Lola."

"I don't know," I sighed tiredly. And then I added sarcastically, "Why don't you ask my Auntie Zetta? She sells dozens of them. All kinds of colors, too. Amethyst, quartz, jade, and citrine. They're all real pretty. I'm sure she'll give you a good deal since you and I are supposedly old friends."

Again, Natasha bore the tight smile. But she didn't respond to me. Instead, with a flick of her finger, she motioned Gorge. And suddenly he was in front of me. Without the slightest hesitation, Gorge lifted his heavy fist and it came crashing down on my right cheek. The sheer force alone knocked me from the chair and onto the floor. I was suddenly very, very awake now, and spitting out blood on the commercial carpeting. I felt my jaw for loose teeth, but thankfully, it seemed they were all still intact.

"Now let's try this once more," Natasha spoke. Her voice remained sinisterly cheerful. "I can be your best friend, Lola, or your greatest enemy. I think it would be very wise of you to tell me the truth. I don't appreciate being toyed with."

I glanced up at her from over my shoulder, looking at her tall figure from between the strands of dark hair that had fallen into my face. I swore if her henchman wasn't there, I would have been delighted to strangle her skinny neck.

"Lady, I just got my memories back a few days ago," I gritted out, blood still seeping from my lips. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

She nodded, contemplating what I'd said. "All right then, I'll bite," she told me. "You have one hour to start digging in that frazzled little brain of yours to figure out where the primus is. But if you don't remember within the hour. . .things are going to get a little messy."

Natasha knelt down to reach into her boot, pulling out a thin pocketknife. "You see this?" She remained at my eye level and held it up for display. "I know it's small. Probably not even big enough to puncture a wound deep enough to kill you. . ." Her smile turned deadly. "But it is thin enough to slice directly between your fingernail and the skin on top of your finger. Gorge will show you how it works when he returns for you. . .unless of course your memories have suddenly come back to you by that point. And let's hope that does happen-- it would make things so much easier for you."

Natasha tossed the knife to Gorge and then they both proceeded to leave the room. Even with my face still throbbing and my panic at an all-time high, I couldn't manage to stay awake long enough to try and remember anything about my past lives. I passed out on the carpet within a few moments.

THIRTY

It's funny how pain can bring the worst out in people. I'd never really been good at dealing with pain in the first place. So maybe I'm a worst-case scenario. But I couldn't be sure.

Unfortunately, for Natasha and Gorge (and my fingers for that matter), I hadn't been able to remember where their damn crystal ball was. And when Natasha told me I would be tortured, she certainly wasn't lying.

My fingers were still bloody.

I'd screamed the entire time- that was a given. But I'd also begged, pleaded and cried until my voice was hoarse and raw. I was a pathetic mess.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know!" I had shouted at one point. But when I couldn't come up with a location for the primus, Gorge had set to work digging the blade of his knife under my next fingernail.

It had been excruciating. I'd even passed out halfway through the first hand. But lucky for me, Gorge just happened to have smelling salts.

Wouldn't you just know it. . .

And as soon as I came to, he went to work right where he left off.

When the torturing hadn't produced any information from me, Gorge left me alone for another hour. The next time he appeared, I

was greeted with a blow to my rib cage, knocking me down to the floor. I was almost positive he'd cracked a bone.

Natasha ordered him to leave me be at that point. She was starting to believe I really didn't know where their crystal was. But Gorge had argued with her. "Do you really believe she's telling the truth? She gave her own life to protect it! What makes you think she'll give it up so easily?"

Natasha contemplated his argument, staring at me with a set of darkly shadowed irises. "You're right," she'd finally conceded. "Let's give her the night to think things over. If she still refuses to speak tomorrow, we'll saw off her entire hand."

They'd left the room after that, right before I'd thrown up all over the floor. Since there hadn't been anything in my stomach to begin with, not much came up. It was mostly liquid, but it reeked, making my environment that much more unpleasant.

I tried my best to move to the other side of the pole I had been re-tied to, groaning because I felt a sharp pain coming from my rib cage.

This had to be the closest reality to hell. And tomorrow it would only become worse. Tomorrow I'd lose a hand. I wished I could cry, but I didn't have any tears left, as dried out as I was. I thought it ironic because I'd always considered myself the rare weeper. Oddly though, I'd found myself crying a good deal these days.

More than anything, I longed for Gabe. I sighed dreamily, imagining him coming to my rescue. The fantasy brought me a small comfort. I could just imagine him putting his arms around me now,

telling me everything would be all right. He'd swear to me he'd never let anyone hurt me ever again. I almost smiled. That was just the sort of thing he would say. . .and then he'd caress my face and kiss my lips. He'd stroke my hair and pull me close. He'd wake me up from this nightmare.

~ ~

Sometime during the night, I'd found the ability to drift off to sleep. Yet something had woken me. I sat up, and then grimaced as I felt my back and side scream from pins and needles. The pole was definitely no recliner.

I suddenly heard a clicking sound, which terrified me. I glanced up at the window, verifying that it was still nighttime. Daylight meant the loss of my hand and I wasn't ready to deal with that yet.

The door creaked open and an outline of someone's shadow filled the light within the doorway.

"Lola?" I heard a male voice call out. "Are you in here?"

I couldn't speak. I couldn't even make a sound because I was so stunned. But he noticed me anyway and moved to my side.

"Thank God, you're alive!" he exclaimed, reaching for my ropes.

I marveled as Cam's features came into view. "They sent *you* to rescue me?"

He paused in his efforts to until the rope that had been restraining me in order to bestow the most derisive look I'd ever seen come from him.

"Well if that ain't gratitude for you, I don't know what is," he grumbled.

"Sorry," I stammered. "I just assumed Gabe would come if anyone did."

"Oh, he's here," Cam told me. "He's outside-- beating the hell out of your abductors."

I couldn't help the feeling of immediate relief. I even sighed. He came for me! He still cared for me! And I would be eternally happy!

"You're remarkable," Cam said, shaking his head. "You're completely in love with him and yet you refuse to let him see it. Why?"

I pulled the ropes off my hands with a vengeance. It felt so good to be free and in the same instance, I was completely annoyed with Cam for seeing right through me.

"Thank you, Cam," I muttered. "Now, can we please get going?"

"By all means."

Standing up, however, proved more difficult than I'd thought it would be. I stumbled, but caught myself on the pole I'd been tied to.

"Hey, are you okay?" Cam asked. His voice now held traces of concern.

"Yeah, I think so." I attempted to right myself, more slowly this time. "I've just been sitting there for so long. . ."

There must have been a flicker of light illuminating my movement because Cam let out a low gasp. Then I realized how awful I must look, how my face and fingers were still stained with blood. I'd completely forgotten about it. "It probably looks worse than it really is," I assured him.

Cam's eyes glittered with unshed tears. He traced my jaw with the barest touch of his index finger and then he sighed heavily. "My God, Lola. . .Gabe is going to murder whoever has done this to you."

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THIRTY-ONE

Cam helped me amble down the stairs and led me outside of the office building. I didn't recognize the area, so I assumed we were a good distance away from home.

Out in the parking lot, Gabe held Gorge up by his collar, against the side of his truck. But as soon as he saw Cam and me coming, he threw Gorge down to the ground. He was almost immediately at my side.

I think he went to reach for me, but then he noticed my face. I saw him swallow. Cam didn't help matters by grabbing my wrist and holding up my hand for Gabe to view.

"She was tortured," he informed his brother.

Gabe didn't speak for a moment, but I could see the tension building in his brow and in his shoulders. Eventually, in a very low and deep voice, he asked me, "Which one of them did this to you?"

I felt a little panicked at that moment. I wondered if Cam was right. I wondered if Gabe would actually kill Gorge. Granted, I hated that man with a passion beyond any rage I'd ever felt before. . .but I didn't want his death on my conscious and I didn't want it on Gabe's, either.

"Gabe, I--"

"Answer my question, Lola." He didn't shout at me, but his tone remained serious.

I wasn't sure what to do. I looked to Cam, searching his eyes for an answer. "It's okay, Lo," Cam assured me. "You can tell him."

Trusting that Cam would know how to handle things around his brother, I lifted my hand and pointed to Gorge. "Him," I said in a small voice.

Gabe nodded. Then, he turned to Cam and commanded roughly, "Take her back inside."

"What?" I said, startled.

Cam gently, but forcefully took my arm and began to lead me back towards the main door of the office building.

"No!" I cried. Gabe removed a gun from the back of his pants. I heard the click, indicating he'd turned the safety off. "Gabe, you can't do this!" I screamed.

"Get her out of here!" Gabe shouted. I was suddenly lifted up over Cam's shoulders and carried inside of the building. I cried out from the pressure he'd put on my torso. Cam released me once we were inside. But as soon as he let me go, he blocked the only exit.

Still hoarse from screaming earlier, my voice wouldn't carry very far. I still tried with all my might to shout to Gabe. Fat tears streamed down my cheeks uncontrollably and I pounded on Cam's chest as I tried to move him out of my way.

"Gabe-- Gabriel, please! Please don't kill him!"

But Cam wouldn't budge. And then it was too late. I stopped shouting when I heard the gunshot blare.

Slowly, I dropped down to the ground in a daze, the noise ringing in my ears. Cam knelt to my side. "I'm sorry you had to be here for that."

"How could you?" I asked him angrily. "You lied to me. You told me that I could tell him. You said it would be okay!"

Cam didn't seem the least bit remorseful. Without flinching, he said, "It was okay, Lola, because that man deserved to die. I wanted him dead, too."

It shocked me how cold Cam's voice sounded. How could my cheerful friend so easily turn this callous? I didn't understand it. This time, when I pushed him out of my way, he actually let me around him.

Outside, I found Gabe tying Natasha up by her hands and feet. She looked as if she'd been knocked unconscious.

I couldn't help but think of how I'd prayed so hard that Gabe would find me. I'd dreamed of him coming for me, and fantasized about running into his arms. I would feel safe there, had always felt safe there. There was a part of me that still wanted to find comfort in his arms, even after knowing what he'd done.

"Why did you have to kill him?" I asked bitterly. My tears were replaced with anger. "Now you're no better than he is."

Slowly, Gabe walked towards me, though he didn't come too close. He didn't wrap his arms around me like I'd hoped for. He didn't stroke my hair or caress my cheek. Instead, he merely told me, "That man died so that he will never have the chance to do what he did to you to anyone else. At least not in this lifetime. And you may

not think I'm any better than him. But I assure you, Lola, I will be able to sleep tonight. I'll sleep soundly knowing that he's dead and you're safe."

With that said, Gabe walked away from me.

The area surrounding the remote office building became a crime scene not long after Gabe shot my abductor. I sat on the bed of his truck, watching as police officers, EMTs and a few spectators began to arrive at our location. Bitterly, I wondered where all these people suddenly emerged. Where had they been while I screamed at the top of my lungs for hours on end?

At least it seemed like everything was under control. Gabe was making his rounds with the investigators, answering questions and helping to detain Natasha. He was very calm and collected. It seemed so natural for him, but I supposed he was in his element. It was almost as if it was just another day on the job for him.

I heard Gabe mention to Cam that there might be others in Natasha and Gorge's tribe lurking somewhere nearby. This news alarmed me. But then I also heard him say that if there was anyone out there, he doubted they would show up. I sincerely hoped he was right.

Thankfully, there were no sign of news reporters yet. I wanted to be on my way home by the time any arrived. I really didn't want to be filmed, especially in this condition. I was hopeful that this kidnapping thing would stay quiet, but I knew it usually wasn't the case. The American media was known for making it a big deal any time a minor went missing. On the other hand, it did seem like Gabe and Cam were trying their best to involve me as little as possible and for that I was immensely grateful.

I had listened quietly earlier while they had given their full account of the recent events. The story they fed the investigators was that Gabe shot Gorge with his gun in defense. Not one person doubted their statement. It all seemed very casual, actually. In fact, most people regarded Gabe as a hero for coming to my rescue. Truth be told, I considered him one, too. I just wished he hadn't had to kill anyone in order to become that hero. Plus, I was still furious with Gabe for not listening when I had begged him not to shoot Gorge. I felt like that decision should have been mine to make. And yet, it had been taken out of my hands, without so much as regard for my opinion.

Needless to say, I was in a very cranky mood. Luckily for the investigators, no one had spoken to me yet. I think everyone believed I was still in shock or something. Who knows, maybe I was in shock.

The only person who had been speaking to me at all was an EMT. The lady had been trying for the last half hour to get me to go in an ambulance with her. I had refused her several times now, but she was hard-pressed to take no for an answer.

"No thanks," I said to her for the tenth time. "I don't like hospitals."

Concerned, she eyed me warily. She was very pretty, I noticed. She was middle-aged with large brown eyes and a kind, motherly sort of face. "Miss Moori, you may have broken bones. You *need* to come with me."

"Thanks for the offer, lady. I appreciate it, but the answer is still no."

Gabe, who had been busy answering questions for a few police officers, happened to hear the EMT pleading with me.

The cross look in his eyes was almost formidable. "You will go to the hospital, Lo. Do you understand me?"

The authority practically reeked from his voice. I wasn't so sure that I liked this cop version of Gabe. Fortunately, his attention was captured by yet another officer. I decided to ignore his command, much to the kind paramedic's chagrin. Because she couldn't get me into the back of her ambulance, she'd decided to bring her medical bag to where I sat on the bed of Gabe's truck. "You have to let me clean out your hands, at least. They could very easily get infected."

Grudgingly, I let her win this one. I figured she wouldn't ease up on me unless I threw her some kind of bone. So I let her check me out.

She clicked her tongue when she first inspected the damage.

"That woman...and that man," she said in a soft voice. "They deserve to rot in hell for what they did to you."

I almost smiled. It endeared her to me for saying that. And I agreed with the paramedic. But unfortunately, I knew that Natasha and Gorge would just show up again in the next life. And they'd keep showing up until we all met our maker or until the end of time-whichever came first. Gypsies didn't know the outcome of life any more than normal people did.

But maybe, just maybe Natasha would get what she deserved for her wickedness. Earlier, I heard Natasha yelling while being stuffed into the back of a cop car. It grabbed my attention because it had surprised me to hear what she had been shouting. "He planted that coke on me! I swear it's not mine!" she'd exclaimed. Everyone had rolled their eyes, ignoring her cries of outrage. But I had a sneaking suspicion she had been telling the truth. She'd merely been labeled as an accomplice, not the actual criminal since Gorge had done all her dirty work for her.

What could she possibly get for that? Five years in prison maybe? But now she'd been busted with cocaine- and apparently it had been a *lot* of cocaine, she would be put away for much longer. I had a strong feeling Gabe had something to do with the drugs they found on her.

However, I didn't feel remotely guilty for Natasha, even if she was telling the truth. I had a feeling that whenever she was released from prison, she'd probably come after me for revenge. And if her anger wasn't directed at me, she'd come after Gabe. Either way, it made me feel better knowing she'd be locked up for a long time.

I winced as I felt the sting of alcohol. The paramedic was being as gentle as she could, but it was still quite painful. And it reminded me of the pain I'd experienced while Gorge was torturing me, which wasn't exactly a pleasant experience.

Thankfully, Miriam's car showed up only minutes later. I saw her scanning the area and I assumed she was looking for me, so I called out to her.

"That's my grandmother," I explained to the paramedic.

She nodded, but continued to disinfect my fingers. Miriam rushed to my side as soon as she caught sight of me. She put my face between her hands, surveying the damage. No doubt, Gabe had told her everything before the cops had gotten here. I wished he hadn't told her, because her expression was heartbreaking. I don't think I'd ever seen Miriam get overly emotional before. It was foreign to me, seeing her bite her bottom lip and her eyes watering with unshed tears.

"I was so worried," she breathed.

"I'm fine," I assured her. "Really, I am."

"You certainly don't look fine, little girl." She glanced down at my hands, but quickly looked away, shuddering. "Good heavens. I didn't realize it was that bad."

"It's *okay*, I promise you. It looks worse than it really is. Besides, the fingernails I'm missing will grow back eventually."

I smiled, trying to provide her with reassurance. I had been going for something altruistic, but my right cheek was swollen and I could barely lift it. The crooked grin was undoubtedly comical. And I

started to chuckle about it, which only seemed to make matters worse. I heard a small hiccup sound from the back of Mirum's throat before she raised a hand to her mouth and looked away.

Curiously, I whispered to the paramedic, "What did I say? Fingernails do grow back, don't they?"

The paramedic nodded.

"Okay, good."

After Miriam collected herself, she turned back to me and asked, "Lola, why aren't you on your way to the hospital?"

The EMT immediately spoke up, much to my irritation. "I've been trying to get her into the ambulance, but she refuses to budge from this spot."

"Oh, great. Now you've done it," I whispered angrily.

"Lola Satrine Moori," Miriam gritted out.

The paramedic only shrugged, uncaring. Her expression clearly said: *I bet* you're in trouble now. "It's never good when they use your full name," she pointed out. Then in a sing-song voice, she added, "You should have listened to me earlier."

"Thanks a lot," I retorted sarcastically.

But my grandmother was in no mood to joke. I guess I couldn't blame her after the ordeal my abduction had probably put her through. Irately, she pointed to the ambulance. but kept her eyes fixated on me. "Get your butt in that vehicle *now*, little girl."

I determined by the sound of her no-nonsense voice that I better listen. I really wasn't up for any additional agony tonight.

I stood up carefully, prepared to walk to the ambulance. I wasn't happy about it- not one little bit. I truly despised hospitals. I hated everything about them, the smell, the confinement and especially the aura of death.

I heard Miriam apologize to the EMT as I walked away. "Sorry about that. She don't have the sense God gave a goat. And I swear she'd argue with a fencepost if she could."

I turned back in time to see confusion spread across the paramedic's face and I nearly had a fit of laughter. It was nice knowing I wasn't the only one who needed a translator for my grandmother's bizarre phrases.

THIRTY-TWO

About two hours and three x-rays later, my hunch had been verified. My rib wasn't broken, but it was fractured. Nonetheless, they gave me really good pain medication for it. I was finally feeling much better. I found out my jaw was in good shape, too. The doctor told me that if Gorge had hit me a little lower, he would've broken my jaw, which meant my mouth would've needed to be wired shut. Thank God he had aimed high.

I quietly laughed to myself when I realized how absurd my thoughts were.

"And what are you so amused by, Miss Moori?" The question had been asked by the same paramedic who had cleaned and bandaged my hands earlier. I later found out her name was Sophie.

"Oh, nothing. I just realized I was thankful over the fact that Gorge had aimed high rather than low when he hit me."

She shook her head in appraisal. "Are you sure I shouldn't transfer you to the psych ward for analysis?"

Miriam, who was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, laughed over Sophie's joke. It relieved me to see she was finally starting to relax.

"So when do I get to leave?" I asked. The doctor had recommended I stay overnight, but since there were no broken bones or trauma, he left the decision up to me.

"Now."

The voice came from the doorway. I looked up to see Gabe standing there. I think he may have been standing there for a while before he'd spoken because he was leaning against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets and his jacket slung across his arm. He looked exhausted. There were dark circles underneath his eyes. Miriam told me while I was waiting for my x-ray results that he hadn't slept since I'd been abducted, and that had been nearly two days ago. My breathing slowed and I felt dizzy after she told me that, realizing the extent of how much he cared.

Even though Gabe had killed Gorge, and even though he'd asked Annika to marry him, my whole heart, defiantly remained in Gabe's possession.

Sophie left the room as Gabe entered it; I think she figured we needed some privacy. She winked at me and waved goodbye as she closed the door.

Gabe moved, standing in front of my grandmother. "Miriam, I hope you won't think I'm out of line here, but I think it's best if Lola comes home with me."

"Whoa," I immediately spoke up. "Don't you feel like I should have a say in this?"

Gabe sighed wearily. "Lola, will you stay at my house for the time being?"

Though I was surprised he bothered to ask me, I still said, "No, thank you. Miriam's house is just fine."

Frustrated, he turned back to Miriam. "Do I have your permission?"

My grandmother bit her lip in contemplation. Finally, she answered him. "Yes. I think that's best, too. For now, anyway."

"Grams!" I shouted.

"You're no longer welcome in my house, Lo. And I won't hear another word about it. You're going with Gabriel."

I groaned. Stubborn, old tyrant.

Gabe leaned over my hospital bed, regarding me. He drew his hand up and across my swollen cheek. His touch was feather-light. "Please, Lola," he breathed. "Please don't fight me on this, not after what I've just been through. Tomorrow you can argue with me until you're blue, I promise. But not tonight. I need to know you're safe."

His words left me speechless, which was an oddity in itself. But he was being so tender and so caring. I knew he meant every word.

I nodded. Geez, I think I might sleep in a kennel if he asked me to right now.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

I attempted to get out of the hospital bed, but Gabe stopped me. "Here, let me." He reached around me, placing his jacket around my shoulders. Then he stretched his arms beneath me and lifted me from the mattress.

"Gabe, I can walk. You don't have to carry me."

But he wouldn't listen. "Put your arm across my shoulder," he instructed.

"Seriously, you look really, really tired. I promise you I can walk just fine." I would have smiled in order to reassure him, but after the effect it had on Miriam, I figured it was best if I didn't go that route.

"Just do it, Lo," he commanded.

Reluctantly, I put my arm across his shoulder.

Gabe quickly carried me as if I had no weight. I rested my head against his chest, sighing. Miriam moved to hold the door open for us.

Randomly, it occurred to me I hadn't once been interviewed the entire night. And so I decided to ask Gabe if he knew why it never happened.

"I took care of it for you," he informed me. "Do you remember Paco Vasquez? You met him when you visited the station."

I thought of the short Hispanic man with the bushy mustache. "Yes, I remember him."

"Well, he led the crime scene tonight. I told him that you've been through enough and that I would give him the information for his report."

"And he simply agreed to that?"

Gabe nodded. "He agreed to leave you alone, but he said he may need to contact you later for your official statement. That probably won't happen until tomorrow or the next day."

"Huh. I didn't even see him there."

"He didn't show up until shortly before you left."

"That was nice of him," I acknowledged. "And of you for asking."

Gabe glanced down at me for a brief moment. He paused as he waited for Miriam to open the doors that led outside.

"Hey, Gabe. . .?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for finding me. . .and for everything."

He looked down at me again; this time his eyes lingered as he observed me. "You're welcome."

Dawn was nearing when we finally made it back to the Constantin house. Miriam stroked my hair before she left me and told me she would come by whenever I woke up. It felt very strange, not going home with her.

Gabe continued to carry me even after we entered his house. He carried me straight up the stairs, into an enormous room with a king-sized bed placed smack in the middle of it. He set me down very gently on the bed, where I sank into the soft sheets, stretching with languor.

Compared to the last few days' attempts at sleeping while being tied up to a pole, this had to be the closest thing to heaven.

Intoxicated, I breathed in the scent from the sheets, picking up the familiar citrus-like smell. My brows furrowed in confusion. "Gabe, whose room is this?"

I glanced up to see he was rummaging through a dresser drawer. "You're in my room. The bathroom is to your left." He tossed me a big t-shirt. "You can wear it if you like. I'm sure it's comfier than a hospital gown."

I was really confused at this point and too tired to think straight. "Wait, why am I in your room?"

He moved closer to the bed, regarding me with his warm gaze. "Don't worry, Lo. I'm not planning on sleeping here tonight."

"But I thought you mentioned something about this house having plenty of guest rooms? I don't want to put you out of your own bedroom when there are others available."

"Yes, but none of them have a bed that's as comfortable as mine," he said. Then he added, "Plus I'm really enjoying knowing you're in my bed right now. It seems right to me."

My stomach tied in knots as a thousand different images instantly flashed through my mind of Gabe and me in bed together. It was a very rare occasion for me to blush or even seem remotely embarrassed, but I was positive my face had gone red with humiliation. Gabe's lazy grin proved he noticed it, too. I wondered if he had done it on purpose.

"Good night, Lo." He leaned down to kiss my forehead.

Afterwards, he exited the room, closing the door.

Great, now I would have to try to sleep with all these seductive images haunting me and my dreams. I bet that's just what he wanted too, the beast.

THIRTY-THREE

My eyes shot open to the sound of a distant knocking. I really hoped the knocking would end without it being necessary for me to actually wake up and answer the door, but someone was being very persistent.

"Lo, can I come in?" I heard someone shout.

It took me a few moments to register who the voice belonged to.

After I heard my name being shouted again, I realized it was Cam.

My brow furrowed confusedly as I sat up in bed. What time was it? I looked around for a clock, but I didn't see any in view. I ended up finding a sleek, expensive-looking Movado watch on the bedside table. I picked up and read the time. It was nine-thirty a.m. I figured that meant I had only been sleeping for approximately four and a half hours.

"Ugh," I groaned. I stared at the pillow longingly, debating if I should simply go back to sleep and ignore Cam.

"Lo-laaa!" he shouted again, louder this time. He was practically banging down the door at this point.

"Okay, okay. Come in already."

It suddenly occurred to me that I was wearing nothing more than Gabe's shirt, so I threw the comforter over my legs. Cam came bustling into the room only a moment later. "This had better be good," I warned him. "Or did you not realize I'm recovering from the most horrific two days of my entire life?"

"Whoa." His brows shot up and his eyes widened. "Your face looks awful. It's all purpley and yellowish." He appeared almost repulsed by my appearance, which made me want to throw the sheets over my head and hide forever.

"What do you want, Cam?" I asked, casting my face downwards.

"We've got trouble," he said. I detected panic in his voice. I also noticed his blonde hair was mussed. Of course, Cam's hair always looked messy in a surfer sort of style, but today it was simply out of control.

"Here, take this." He shoved a duffel bag into my hands.

"Miriam brought it by for you earlier."

I unzipped the bag and looked inside. It contained a bunch of my clothes and toiletries.

"So what's the trouble you mentioned?" I asked as I rummaged through the clothes.

"One of the Royals is here."

I paused as the impact of what he just said fully hit me. "Which one?" I asked, a little worried now.

"Prince Tiberius."

The name ran through my mind as I tried to place it. *Tiberius*, where had I heard that name before? Oh, yeah. He's from the house of Gabor. The house of Gabor was one of the four Royal families,

otherwise known as the working gypsies. They were my favorite of the Royals, but they also held the least amount of power.

"What does he want?" I asked. But the question was pointless because I already knew the answer. He wants me.

"He was sent here to summon you to Redwood Forest."

"I refuse to go," I declared. "I'm an abandoner now. It's not as if they can banish me or something."

Cam raised a brow and stared at me with a 'you really buy that crap?' look, which clearly indicated that he wasn't taking me seriously. We both knew a gypsy never refused a summoning from a Royal. It just wasn't done. Royals were law. And if the law wasn't obeyed, there were always consequences. And the Royals had ways to track someone down, no matter how hard they tried to run or hide.

"Get showered and dressed," Cam told me. "He's sort of impatient-- so hurry."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course," I said to Cam. "God forbid I cross a prince, especially a Gabor."

Cam didn't seem amused by my mockery of the Royal. But that was because the Prince probably had his mind readers close by and fixated on me, listening to every word that escaped my mouth, every thought that passed through my head. But I didn't care if they heard what I was saying or thinking. I very well knew the reason the Royal was in this house. Undoubtedly, he was after the same thing Natasha had been after- the primus thingy she'd been talking about. And I still had yet to remember anything about their primus oracle, or whatever it was called. So as far as I was concerned, the Royal had all the time

in the world to wait. It didn't really matter to me if he was an impatient man or not.

You wasted your time in coming here, Prince, I said with my mind, wondering if anyone was listening in. I don't have the memories you want and even if I did, I'd die before I'd reveal them to you!

I was assuming on the last part, of course. But I figured if I killed myself trying to protect my memories in a past life, then I would most likely do it again in this one.

But something unexpected happened. An arbitrary thought ran through my mind, a thought that hadn't come from me and I nearly had a heart attack as I heard the unfamiliar voice in my head.

We'll save the conversation for when we are face to face, Lola Moori.

I was so completely freaked out by the obtrusive thought that had entered my head without my permission, I ended up rushing after all. I had never witnessed such an ability before. Then again, the Royals were known to be more powerful than the rest of us commoners. And for some inexplicable reason, most of the gypsies within the Royal families had repeatedly been born again within the realms of Royalty for centuries on end. No one had ever been able to

explain why, though the Royals themselves believed they'd been given the right to hold power and it was theirs to keep forever. I thought it was an arrogant belief, yet no one had ever proved them wrong.

Gabe's family was the only exception. The Constantins' were the only family to lose power. Also, they were the first and last Royal abandoners in existence. I knew Gabe had explained the history of his family to me before, sometime in a past life, but I'd forgotten the details.

After showering, I quickly changed into a pair of dark jeans and a brown sweater I found in the bag Miriam had packed for me. Then I headed towards the only mirror in the room and combed my hair out. I tried applying concealer, desperately hoping to cover my bruises. But the makeup hardly helped, which sort of depressed me. I was able to hide most of the darker spots, but there was simply no hiding the swollen balloon my right cheek had formed into. For a brief second, I even considered putting a bag over my head.

Giving up, I headed out of Gabe's bedroom and descended the stairs. I heard voices resonating from the dining room, so I ventured in that direction.

Gabe was waiting for me in the kitchen before I even reached the dining room. He must have used his mind sight to know when I was coming.

My heart skipped a beat as soon as I saw him. He looked so much better today than he had yesterday. He was freshly showered, wearing a crisp, white cotton t-shirt and a pair of khaki trousers.

As soon as he saw me, he reached for me, cupping my face in his hands and looking over my bruises. "I hate that he was able to do this to you. I wish I could kill that bastard again." His passion was intense, causing me to pull away from him. I still didn't want to think about anyone killing anyone.

"How do you feel today?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I assured him. "It's only my vanity that's hurting." "Why? You're still beautiful, Lola."

I smiled uncomfortably. "Thank you," I said. "But I'm sure you're the only one who thinks so. Cam acted like I was a monster when he saw me this morning."

"Cam is overly dramatic. And besides, your swelling will go down and the bruising will fade. Have you been keeping ice on it?"

I shook my head. "Not since the hospital."

Gabe moved towards a nearby drawer and pulled out a zip-lock bag. He reached for the icemaker in the refrigerator door, allowing the crushed ice to vend into the bag.

"So is he in there?" I asked, eyeing the entryway to the dining room.

Gabe handed me the bag of ice. "Yeah. The pompous peacock is enjoying his breakfast-- as if he were here visiting for a bloody tea party."

"Careful," I warned. "He was listening into my thoughts earlier. He'll hear you."

Gabe raised a brow. "How do you know he heard your thoughts?"

"Because I heard him speak to me through my mind."

Surprised, Gabe asked, "What did he say?"

"Nothing, really. I actually spoke to him first. I hadn't been sure if he could hear me or not. Anyway, I was shouting at him in my mind and he told me to save the conversation for later."

"You were shouting at him?"

Embarrassed now, I nodded. "I told him he shouldn't have wasted his time coming here."

I watched as the corners of Gabe's mouth curved, almost into a grin.

"I didn't really think he could hear me," I pointed out. "And I certainly didn't think he would answer back."

"I bet that scared the hell out of you."

"It did," I admitted. "I nearly fell over. I caught myself on your dresser."

He started laughing about that and then I joined in, noticing the humor in it. We both quietly laughed for a few moments, trying to keep our voices down. But the laughter soon faded and I stared ahead dismally, not really seeing anything, lost in apprehension.

"Gabe?"

"What is it, my love?"

"I don't want to go with him."

Gabe tensed. A hardened look of determination settled over his features. "I won't let it happen. I swear it to you."

I could see it in his eyes; he meant every word. I nodded, trusting him completely.

"Come on," Gabe said softly. "Let's get this over with."

Though I wished I could stay in the kitchen forever, I followed Gabe as he led me to the dining room. The first thing I noticed was the huge array of breakfast food spread across the table. My mouth watered at the sight.

The second thing I noticed was the group of unfamiliar faces sitting around the table. A sudden hush spread across the room.

Nearly everyone stopped eating and stood up as we entered.

Neither Baro nor Rex had seen me since I'd been abducted.

Rex stiffened at the sight of my face and bandaged hands. Baro's expression nearly crumbled. He approached me and patted my head with his enormous hand. "I'm so sorry about, everything you went through," he told me. His voice was raw with poignant emotion. "And I'm so thankful to see you alive."

I smiled. For as large and muscular as Baro was, he fit the identity of a giant teddy bear. I realized I had already thought of him in this way before, in another life.

Gently, Baro took me by my arm and lead me to the far end of the table. He brought me before a tall, handsome man with dark green eyes and golden hair.

"Prince Tiberius, may I introduce Lola Moori, daughter to Christo Moori?" Baro turned to me next. "Lola, may I introduce Prince Tiberius Renalo of the Gabor family?"

I thought it was silly to curtsy in jeans, but I also knew some sign of respect was customary. I decided to give a small bow. As I rose, the prince took my hand in his and kissed it. "I was amazed to

hear the story of your bravery. I, too, am very sorry to hear of the ill-fated plight you've recently endured."

"I appreciate your concern," I told the prince. Randomly, I thought about his speech, thinking it was much too fancy for my taste. His clothes were also very flamboyant. I could see from where Gabe had drawn his peacock likeness.

The prince nodded to the empty chair next to him. "Sit and enjoy some food with us, Lola Moori. As I'm sure you're aware, there are issues needing to be discussed."

I happily obliged him. I grabbed a plate and filled it with waffles covered in strawberries and powdered sugar. I realized Baro must have prepared all of this food. I was nearly as amazed as I was on Thanksgiving.

As soon as I sat down and began eating, the prince spoke again. "I would like to be frank and get straight to my reason for being here, if that's all right with you, Lola."

Before stuffing my mouth with a heaping bite of waffles, I said, "I'd prefer you were."

Dimly, I noticed Gabe had taken a seat across from me. He watched the prince untrustingly.

"I realize you must already know you're being summoned. I've been asked personally to come and collect you and take you back to Redwood Forest."

I finished chewing and swallowed my bite before asking, "And what makes you think I'll agree to that?"

The prince sat back in his chair a little straighter. Rigidly, he forced a smile. "I know you've been through a trying time recently, Lola. And for that reason alone, I will forgive your lack of respect. I'd also like to remind you that there is no agreeing or disagreeing to a summoning. If you're called upon, you must do so without question."

"Thanks for enlightening me," I said to him and then took another bite of my waffles.

"Yes, well, let there be no doubt in your mind that should I have needed to, I would have very easily coerced you into coming with me, whether you liked it or not."

I eyed Gabe now, noticing that both of his hands, which lied across the table, were balled into tight fists. He was holding back from this conversation, though it was clearly taking a lot of effort for him to stay out of it.

The prince continued speaking monotonously. "And anyway, I'm much more pleased to tell you that I've not come here to coerce you into doing anything you don't want to do, especially considering your recent tribulations. However, I believe once you hear my proposal, you'll come very willingly."

I nearly coughed in my orange juice after he'd said the last part. "I highly doubt that, your highness, but please go ahead and humor me with this proposal."

"It's simple, really. You come with us and in return. . .we'll extricate your father from his incarceration."

I almost stopped breathing. "He's still in prison?" I asked, shocked.

"Yes, and that's where he'll remain for ten more years. Grand theft auto is no petty crime, you know. But if you agree to my proposal, I'm positive we can work something out."

I didn't understand. Zetta told me my father's lackeys would break him out of jail. Why hadn't they done so by now? She said he wouldn't be in there for very long!

The guilt that had been eating me away for months rapidly came to a forefront. Distraught, I tried to remember exactly what Zetta had said to me that night by the shower. I remember she told me my father would find a way out of jail. . .but she never specifically said how or by whom.

"My God," I breathed. "It was me this whole time."

"Pardon?" the prince asked.

I couldn't believe it! All this time, I was the one who would help my father escape prison. It hadn't been because Luca or his other lackeys would come to his rescue- it would be my doing.

And I would agree to it.

The thought bewildered me. I would agree in order to put an end to the guilt that had been gnawing at me.

"How long would I be away for?" I asked.

Prince Tiberius smiled, knowing he had won.

Gabe slammed his fist down on the table, causing all the dishes to rattle. He stood up from his seat. "This is ridiculous, Lo! You can't possibly be serious right now."

"Please stay out of this, Gabe," I pleaded. "It's my father."

"I know very well who your father is, Lo. If you ask me, he deserves five lifetimes in prison for all the hell he's put you through!"

I stood so I could become eye level with Gabe. I was suddenly very aware of what I needed to do.

Steadily, I said, "Thank you for coming to my rescue last night, Gabe. I will be forever grateful to you. However, it changes nothing. I still want you to marry Annika and I still want to keep my memories intact. There's no way for me to do that in a life where you and I are together."

Gabe shook his head. The fury was sparkling like diamonds in his gray eyes. "There is a way. But you're too much of a coward to try it."

He stormed out of the room in a fit of rage. We all heard a growl resonate from the corridor and the sound of Gabe's fist slamming against the wall. I flinched as the booming sound echoed throughout the house.

Afterwards, Prince Tiberius was the first to speak. "Well, now that *that's* settled, I think we should be on our way." He smiled happily, like a kid with a candy bar.

I felt the urge to slap him. I wanted to take out all my frustrations in one strong hit. Thankfully, I managed to contain myself.

THIRTY-FOUR

We flew to Romania on the prince's private jet. I wasn't surprised by the calming effect the flight had on me. Everyone on the plane was quiet, serene and peaceful. The act of travel was almost like a sedative for our restless souls.

I was going somewhere again. That feeling was amazing. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it over the last few months. And admittedly, I was a little excited to visit Romania. I hadn't visited the country since I was a little girl. My father had never been one to pay tribute to our gathering grounds very often. Booking gigs was our first priority, whether they were the savory or unsavory sorts of gigs. We were always chasing money and it didn't matter which currency it happened to be in.

After a twelve hour flight, we landed on a runway in Bucharest. This was where the prince stored his jet. I had been informed by one of Tiberius's assistants that we were not allowed to fly directly into Redwood Forest. Apparently, it was against the *Rom* laws. The forest must always be kept under wraps. In a way, the place was held sacred by all gypsies. It was rumored that the forest sat on one of the strongest magnetic lines in the world. Many gypsies believed those lines had brought about our very existence.

As the wide, tree-lined boulevards and towering Belle Époque buildings came into view, a sort of nostalgia enveloped me. The city itself appeared much bleaker than it had in its hay day. The locals, also, were not exactly the warm and friendly type. Several images popped up in my mind of a vibrant, romantic version of the streets and buildings which surrounded me, proving to me that this place hadn't always been as it was now. . .

From the departure of the plane, we entered a black SUV. I sat in the back next to the window so I could watch the scenery pass by. I hadn't spoken much to the prince or any of his crew since I'd stepped on his plane. Then again, I didn't really like the prince, nor did I care to converse with him or the people associated with him.

It took us another hour to drive from the city and through the countryside, to reach the outskirts of the forest. Once we were there, we followed a lone path hidden from off the side of the highway.

Another half an hour went by before I heard someone announce, "We're here."

I looked up, but I didn't see anything but more forest ahead of us. We circled around a giant redwood tree. And then we circled around it again.

"Do you people realize we're traveling in circles?" I asked aloud, but no one paid me any attention.

We circled the tree once more before something amazing happened. The camp suddenly came into view. My jaw dropped in shock. "Hey that wasn't there before--" I started to say, then realized there was still no one listening.

My shock was shortly overcome, anyway, as my attention was caught by the beauty of the camp in Redwood Forest. It was even

lovelier than I remembered, almost like a landscape out of a Thomas Kinkade portrait.

A small river ran across the mountainous land, which dropped off by a miniature waterfall into a pond of water. Several people swam in the pond, which was curious activity considering it was nearing December. No snow covered the ground, but those people still had to be freezing. There was a chill in the air. And yet they seemed to be swimming leisurely. Curiously, I wondered if the water descended from a hot spring.

Surrounding the river, hundreds of tents in all shapes, sizes and colors lined up against the bank. Alongside the endless array of tents, there were hundreds more parked RVs. Finally, a charming stone castle with wooden turrets sat in the background of the camp. I heard Prince Tiberius sigh with pleasure upon sight of it. "Castelul de Prieteni. She is beautiful, no?" His question was meant for me, but I didn't bother to answer him.

However, the castle *was* very beautiful. When any of the Royals were visiting Redwood Forest, they would reside there. It wasn't huge; there were only two stories. Also, there was no moat, drawbridge or anything else castle-like. But the grandeur it was built in was simply wondrous; its beauty took my breath away.

Intricate carvings inlay on the stone in the front walls. Over the years, gypsies had carved their artwork into that stone, detailing centuries of beautiful designs and stories. And in the middle of the castle, a huge window ran from the rooftop down to the bottom of the second story, which was entirely created with stained glass. A picture

formed within the glass of a bright orange sun, surrounded by several little yellow stars. The detail was incredible. Seeing the intricacies and beauty of it overwhelmed me with pride for my people.

We headed to the castle now. Though I knew I shouldn't be anticipating my summoning, I was looking forward to taking a tour. I couldn't remember ever having stepped a foot inside of the castle before, at least not in this lifetime, anyway.

As we slowly drove on the pathway through the tents, I noticed there seemed to be a small marketplace set up directly in front of the entrance to the castle. There were several people hawking their wares in this area, selling everything from spices to clothing and jewelry. There were also several food vendors. One man in particular caught my eye. He was grilling authentic Greek gyros, which looked delicious. I definitely wanted to visit that man while I was here.

I also noticed several palm readers and psychics lined up in various tents and booths. Even amongst their own people, the tradition was happily welcomed. The same went for entertainment. Not far from the market, I noticed a young boy standing on a small platform. He was doing fire-breathing tricks for a crowd of onlookers. I really wanted to watch him, but the SUV passed by too quickly.

We eventually pulled into a garage of sorts. It was separate from the castle, but I supposed it had been built more recently. From there, we walked along a pathway leading to the castle doors. While we were making our way inside, Prince Tiberius proceeded to abandon me without any kind of explanation. All he said was, "The guard will show you to your room."

I tried shouting at him as he walked away, but he didn't even bother looking back.

Turning to the guard he'd left me with, I asked, "When I am supposed to be summoned?"

"The residing queen will send for you."

I bit my lip anxiously. Since there was nothing I could do but wait, I merely nodded and let the guard lead the way.

Once I had the chance to observe my surroundings, I was rather amazed. The huge stonewalls towered around me, but it didn't feel like I was on the inside of anywhere. It was almost as if the designers managed to bring the outside to the inside of the castle walls. There were potted plants everywhere I looked. Parts of the flooring had been carved out to create a shrubbery, which lined the main hall's background.

Another thing I noticed was there was no furniture- anywhere. However, I did see several giant, overstuffed pillows spread about on intricately woven Persian rugs. I presumed people used the pillows to sit on, like chairs. It was the same type of seating you would find in a gypsy tent. I wondered why no one had ever incorporated tables and chairs. It was a castle, after all.

The guard led me through two separate corridors and upstairs to the second floor, which was extremely light and airy. Plants were spread everywhere on this floor, also, but because the windows ran from the floor to the ceiling, and they had been left open, it felt like one big balcony. Cool, winter breezes flowed through the air, ventilating the entire floor.

I was led into the west wing, to one of the furthest bedrooms along the hall. The guard pulled out a giant, brass key from a ring on his belt, and then inserted it into the lock on the door. It clicked and he pushed the door in, holding it open for me. I walked inside and looked around my temporary home.

It was a standard bedroom, I supposed. Not very large, not very small. There was one window and one closet. The only thing different about the room was there was no bed present. There was just a single bedroll in the corner of the room, with giant pillows propped up around it. I could handle the lack of the bed, though. Sleeping on the ground was more familiar to me, anyway.

I turned back to the guard just as he was handing me the key.

"There will be a guard posted at the entrance to the west wing at all times to ensure the safety of all who reside here, including yourself. Should you need anything, or if you come in contact with any trouble, you need only to shout and we will quickly come to your aid."

I nodded to let him know I understood. "Thanks," I acknowledged him dimly.

"The washroom is at the end of the hall."

"Okay," I said, and then asked, "Hey wait-- so when is this queen going to send for me?"

"When she is ready."

His answer wasn't exactly as specific as I'd hoped for, but it was all I had to go by. I dropped my bag on the ground gloomily. The

guard disappeared, shutting the door behind him. I suddenly felt very, very alone.

I supposed I should unpack, but I didn't bring that many things with me to begin with. Plus, I figured unpacking would only make me feel a sense of permanence. Since I was against the idea, I decided I wouldn't make it worse for myself. In the end, I chose to stuff my bag in the room's one small closet.

Not knowing what else to do, I decided to open the bedroom door. I peeked around the corner. Sure enough, a guard stood there, posted by the entrance to the west wing.

I sighed despondently and closed the door. *I guess I am stuck here for now*, I thought to myself.

I suddenly yawned, tired. A bout of jet lag flooded over my body and so I decided to take a nap. Surprisingly, I realized I hadn't slept a wink on the plane. I guess I'd been too excited to be traveling again.

I laid down on the bedroll carefully, testing it out. It was very foam-like, but it seemed comfy enough. I stretched, sinking into the material. As soon as my head touched the pillow, I fell into a deep slumber.

THIRTY-FIVE

I wasn't sure how long I'd been sleeping for, but later on that night, I awoke to the sound of someone knocking on my door. It was one of the guards, this time a different one. I guess they'd already switched shifts.

"Miss Moori, the Queen has requested you come to the great hall to receive your summoning."

"What time is it?" I asked groggily.

The guard glanced down at his watch, "It is six.p.m., local time," he answered.

"Okay, but I need a few minutes to get ready."

He nodded and waited outside my door.

I quickly tore off my clothes since I had been traveling all day in the same outfit. I changed into a long, cotton skirt with a short-sleeved white blouse. I chose not to wear my bracelets today. My wrists were too tender from Gorge's rope cutting into my skin. Instead, I settled on the one pair of gold earrings I had brought with me. Afterwards, I ran a comb through my hair and brushed my teeth, hoping I was presentable enough for whomever the residing queen happened to be.

As the guard led me to the great hall, I asked him if he knew which queen I was being summoned to.

"Bonjara," was his short answer.

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. The Bonjaras were my least favorite of the Royal families. However, that particular family happened to be the most powerful of the Royals. Their lineage traced back to ancient India. The family had formed a band of travelers during those times, long before the first gypsies were ever heard of. But I never liked the Bonjaras- not any of them. I felt like they were a pack of power-hungry wolves. They were known for being very wise, but they were also far too serious most of the time. Rarely would you ever catch a Bonjara smiling.

So it was unfortunate for me that the only queen in residence happened to be from this particular family. And she was just as I expected: a serious, no-nonsense sort of woman who never smiled and basically lacked all enthusiasm for life. Her hair was long and as black as a raven's feathers, with an almost bluish quality to it. Her eyes were like little black coals, with a heavy liner of kohl drawn on her lids. The only thing that saved her from looking exactly like Morticia from the Adam's Family was her olive complexion.

"My name is Esmeralda," she informed me as soon as I took a seat on the overstuffed pillow across from her.

"I am well aware of who you are, your highness."

The queen nodded. I am sure she expected her name to be well-known throughout the gypsy tribes.

"I heard about your recent encounter with the rogue gypsies. Your face looks quite devastating. I am sorry you endured this."

"Thank you," I said. "Have you found your room accommodating?" she asked politely.

"It's nice."

"That's good to hear. Especially since you'll be living with us now."

I flinched. "So um...yeah. I kinda wanted to talk to you about that. Exactly how long do you need me to stay? I was never given a specific timeframe."

Startled by my question, she answered matter-of-factly, "Why indefinitely, of course."

My lips parted as the confusion settled in. "Excuse me?" I asked. I was taken aback by her absolute answer, which she had imparted without even a speck of hesitation.

"You will live here from now on. Or at least until you remember where the oracle is. Unless we are assured the oracle is in safe hands, you will be considered a threat to not only gypsies, but mankind, itself. You haven't yet remembered where it is, correct?"

"No, I haven't remembered," I answered tightly.

"Then you will stay here with us until you do."

I was suddenly very, very annoyed by this woman. I was bothered not only by the fact that she was telling me that my entire life would be spent in this castle under lock and key, but I was even more irritated by the fact that she told me without an ounce of emotion. I felt like I was in the middle of a business transaction.

"Okay, I think there's been a misunderstanding," I told her as nicely as I could. "I only agreed to come here. Not to stay here forever."

"I apologize for any misunderstanding, Lola Moori. However, I provided you with substantial clarification. You will live amongst the Royals permanently. Many would consider that a very good life. You have been blessed."

Okay, now I was angry. And I was done with holding it back.

"You really think so?" I asked sarcastically. "Because most gypsies I know would rather rot in hell than stay in one place for the rest of their lives. Did you think I would be as happy as a clam about this? Are you even a true *Rom*?"

That last part I knew was hitting below the belt for any gypsy, and especially a Royal. She didn't give as much of a reaction as I would have liked, but I noticed that she sucked in her breath. It was something, anyway.

"There may be opportunities for you to venture out of Redwood Forest, Lola. I can certainly look into that for you. We would have to ensure your safety comes first, of course. And most likely, extra security would be needed. It will undoubtedly take tremendous planning in order for any travel to be possible for you."

"Thanks for the offer," I told her. "But I have a life. And as much as I love Redwood Forest, it's not here."

I stood up, prepared to make my grand, theatrical exit. But the queen cut me off by saying, "This matter is not being left up for your decision, Lola Moori. Unfortunately, the memories hidden in your

mind hold a higher importance than your well-being. You affect the lives of many just by what you remember."

"And what gives you the right to claim my memories, your highness? Just because you're a damned Royal doesn't mean you can play God."

"That is true," the queen allowed, narrowing her eyes. "But I am privileged with an engrained right to protect my people. And I will protect them from any threat...including you."

Her chin raised a little, almost haughtily. I decided I hated her right then and there.

I stomped away, furious at the queen for winning this battle.

Furious that she didn't get upset when I'd blatantly disrespected her.

And furious at myself for having no control over the entire situation.

When I heard the click of footsteps behind me, I turned to view two guards following me in my wake. I let out a frustrated groan when I saw them. This was karma. I couldn't help but think so. This had to be my punishment for putting my father in prison. Because now I was in prison, too.

THIRTY-SIX

After one full day and one full night of living in the palace, I was okay. I went for a walk. I gathered a few flowers and herbs from the nearby field. I watched a snake charmer perform his act within the camp. And all of this was done with two guards at my heels.

The next day wasn't so bad, either. I asked the servants to fetch me a television in the morning. Later that afternoon, it was delivered and set up in my room. I spent the day practicing my Romanian by flipping through the channels. Thankfully, the receiver picked up MTV and a few British channels, so I watched those for a while.

On the third day, I asked for a DVD player and a collection of American movies. Someone came by not too long after with my DVD player, but the only American movies they could find were *Titanic* and *The Dark Knight*. I watched them both.

On the fourth day, I asked for a laptop with Internet connection so that I could order more movies. However, I was told it would take at least a week for this to be acquired.

The next day, I went into the camp again. I watched a few more performances and bought a wooden box from a wood carver. He had carved a boat onto the surface. It reminded me of Gabe's crappy boat and of my former freedom. I used it to hold my bracelets.

The next few days passed in the same lazy manner.

By the end of the week, I was ready to bang my head against the wall.

It didn't help that the Royals would have nothing to do with me. They didn't associate themselves on an intimate basis with other gypsies. A few of the younger princes winked at me in passing, but I knew what they wanted and it certainly wasn't the kind of friendship I was interested in giving them. However, if I admitted it to myself, I probably would mess around with a few of them if I weren't still so hung up on Gabe. I'd gladly give my virginity over just from sheer boredom. The thought appalled me a little.

Since the Royals didn't want anything to do with me, I tried to befriend the guards and servants. That didn't work out so well, either. Most were here on a temporary basis, the crews shifting in and out frequently. They were only here to make a few bucks and leave as quickly as possible. It was the same for the rest of the camp, too; however, most of the tribes that came to Redwood Forest treated it as a family gathering of sorts. They visited for a while and after about a week, they packed up and split.

The entire forest was a very fleeting type of place. Almost like an airport. Excitement came with the new arrivals. And it was exciting while it lasted, but nothing lasted long enough for true reflection.

By the second week with the Royals, I was ready to slit my wrists and call it a life.

Thankfully, someone came knocking at my door to rescue me from my boredom. I was in the middle of reading a novel, lazily sprawled across my bedroll. I jumped up as soon as I heard the knock

and rushed to throw my door open. The guard who stood in the entryway announced, "You have a visitor."

I raised my brows, surprised by the news. "Really? A visitor?" The guard simply nodded and said, "Follow me to the parlor."

As we walked along the corridor, I wondered who the visitor would be. I hadn't really had the chance to say goodbye to Miriamnot that I was given all that much of a chance. As soon as I had agreed to go with Tiberius, he'd readied his plane within the hour. But I knew she knew I was okay. I'd called her a hundred times since then. I even lied and told her how happy I was to be living in Redwood Forest. I didn't want her to worry. She seemed to buy it, so I highly doubted she would come all this way just to check on me.

And then there was Gabe...he was always lingering in the back of my mind. But it was really hard to believe Gabe would ever come for me. I'd made it perfectly clear I wanted nothing more to do with him when we'd last parted...I often wondered if he believed me. Of course, I wanted him to believe me, I reminded myself. But there was a small part of me (a very selfish part of me) hoping he didn't fall for my charade. I knew it was wrong, but I so desperately wished I could see him again. I just wanted to stare into his beautiful gray eyes and tell him I didn't mean any of it. I wanted to tell him that my heart was his to keep until the end of time.

But I didn't foresee that happening any time soon. It was probably for the best, anyway.

So at this point I had no idea who my visitor would be. I walked into one of the castle's many parlors, extremely curious.

My jaw nearly dropped when I laid my eyes on him.

He stood there by the sofa; his back was to me because he was staring out the window in contemplation. I easily recognized his dark brown hair. It still didn't possess even the slightest hint of gray. Then again, he was only thirty-six. He and my mother had both been very young when they had me.

"Daddy," I whispered.

He turned as soon as he heard me speak. "Lola Belle," he greeted me.

I was too stunned to say anything. I couldn't believe Christo was actually here, out of prison and looking as healthy as a horse.

"Wow, Lo," he said. He seemed nearly as surprised as I was. "You look amazing. You went and grew up on me these past few months."

My eyes watered. I wanted to say something- anything, but my throat was too constricted. I couldn't get the words out.

"Well, are you going to just stand there? Or are you going to come over here and give me a hug?"

Stammering, I said, "I--I didn't think we were on a hugging level."

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Why? Because you gave your old man what he deserved?" He made a waving gesture. "Water under the bridge. Now get over here."

I nearly ran to him, hugging him tightly. "I'm so sorry," I apologized.

He whispered into my ear. "It's okay, Lo. I promise you everything is okay between you and me. You're my flesh and blood, for crying out loud. How could I possibly stay mad at you?"

I pulled away from him and we both sat down on the nearby pillows. "But you had to be upset in the beginning," I pointed out, and waited for him to confirm if it was true.

He tilted his head to the side. "Okay. I'll admit I was mad as hell-- at first. But being locked up gives a man. . .perspective."

I smiled, feeling a little warmer inside. He reached for a large package behind him, and handed it to me. It was a brown box, tied up with strings.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's a Christmas present. I bought it for you back in the states."

I let out a small breath, amazed because I hadn't even realized what day it was.

"Open it later," he told me. "When you're back in your room." He gestured towards the guard by the door and I nodded back in a quiet understanding. There was something inside the box he didn't want anyone seeing but me.

"I still feel awful," I stated, quickly trying to change the subject.

"Was it terrible being locked up?"

He merely shrugged. "It wasn't exactly the Ritz-Carlton, but I guess I had it coming to me."

"Well, you did try to turn me into a whore," I pointed out.

His expression contorted with a look of protest. "I didn't try to turn you into a whore! Madam Wilda's offer included a dating scenario- with a potential for earning loads of money."

"Dad, you just defined the meaning of prostitution."

He scratched his head thoughtfully. "I don't know why, but I really thought it was a great idea at the time."

I raised a brow. "You don't know why?"

He shrugged. "What? I was convinced I was giving you a good life. Honest to God, Lo, I really believed I was."

"Oh, I know why you thought it was a good idea. You were only thinking about fattening up your wallet."

"That's not true!" he exclaimed. "That's not the only thing I was thinking about."

I almost laughed. If I hadn't been so annoyed by the situation, I might have. Instead, I rolled my eyes out of frustration. "Well, I'm glad you held everyone's interest at heart," I told him, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

He sighed. His large, brown eyes showed the genuine remorse he felt. "I guess I'm not very good at apologizing."

"No, you're definitely not."

"I'm sorry. I really am." I could see he meant it. After a moment, he added, "And I guess I should have run it by you first before selling you to Madam Wilda."

I shook my head, shaking with laughter. No matter how annoyed I was, I couldn't hold it in this time. "Dad?"

"Yes, Lo?"

"I would have never agreed to that."

"Well, I know that *now*," he said, almost indignantly. But he could see by my expression that I wasn't upset with him anymore. He grinned back at me.

After hugging me again, he pointed out, "So I see there are larger issues at hand."

He glanced around the room, nodding towards the entirety of the castle.

"Yeah, I'm pretty much stuck here. They won't let me leave. Do you think you can get me out of it?"

I noticed the guard shifted at my request. We both glanced at him in alarm.

"The Royals know what is best," my father said loudly enough for the guard to hear. But then he winked at me. "I'll work on it," he promised.

I smiled happily. Though I knew escape would be nearly impossible, his promise gave me a small measure of hope.

"So, there's someone waiting out in the hall who would like to see you very much."

My brows shot up in surprise. Who else was here?

My father signaled the guard. A moment later, a girl with a very notable shade of dark auburn hair raced into the room. Overjoyed, I shouted, "Lina!"

Lina smiled widely and threw her arms around me. Always the very sensitive type, her brown eyes glistened with tears. "I missed you

so much, Lo!" she told me. "And I have a million and one stories to tell you!"

"Yeah, I've got some interesting news for you, too," I admitted.

"Well, I guess we have a *lot* of catching up to do. Where can we get some privacy?"

I laughed, rolling my eyes in the directions of the guards.

"That's not exactly possible in this house."

Lina's eyes narrowed. "How rude," she proclaimed huffily.

"My thoughts exactly."

Lina and I wound up spending most of the evening in my bedroom catching up with one another. It was the only place I could think of that wouldn't have a guard right outside the door. She told me about all her recent adventures. Apparently, she'd experienced a lot more freedom without being underneath Christo's thumb twenty-four/ seven.

I ended up telling Lina all about Gabe and the return of my memories. She was actually quite upset after I told her everything. She'd never known that I couldn't remember my past lives. Whenever it was brought up before, I would either feed Lina my usual lies or I would simply tell her I didn't want to talk about the past. She'd just accepted that. So I couldn't blame her for being hurt. She was my best

friend, after all. Truthfully, I think I never told her because I was afraid it would mean I was different from her and the rest of the *Roms*. I figured she would see me as an ordinary *gaji*. Now, I almost wished that had been the case.

"So what is with this Gabriel person? You're actually in love with him? And you can't help it?"

"Whoa," I said. "Slow down with the interrogation. Yes, I love him. And yes, I can't help it."

She contemplated that for a moment. Then she asked, "And he is a Constantin?"

"Yes, but they have really good reasons for abandoning the rest of the Royals. At least I think they do. I know he's explained it to me before, in a past life. I just don't remember all the details."

"Oh, I have no doubt of it. I can base my judgments of the Royals on what they've done to you alone. It's awful of them, keeping you locked up in here. How could any gypsy do that to another? It's like an unforgivable sin or something."

I liked Lina's analysis. I only wished someone could point it out to Queen Bonjara.

"I just don't understand why you never told me about this before," she sighed. "I feel stupid, not knowing."

The hurt expression that crossed her features caused a wave of guilt to spread over me.

"I'm really sorry. Lina. It had nothing to do with trusting you, I promise. I didn't tell anyone because of my own insecurities."

She nodded, accepting my apology. "Oh, damn," she muttered sullenly.

"What is it?"

"We only have about fifteen minutes until they come to fetch me. Someone just made the decision."

It was weird, having Lina's abilities surrounding me again. I'd forgotten how easy it was to have someone tell me what was coming.

"Oh, that sucks," I whined. "I feel like you just got here."

Lina chuckled. "Lo, we've been talking for nearly three hours," she pointed out.

I felt my brows rise in astonishment. "Has it really been that long? I didn't even realize it."

"So there's one thing I want to know before I go," Lina announced. "I don't believe your whole speal about not wanting to stay with Gabe because you don't want to end up remembering where the oracle is located. I think you and I both know it's bound to happen either way, especially at the rate you're remembering everything. So why didn't you choose to stay with the man you love with the little time you may have together?"

I frowned. Lina knew me too well. Since I hadn't been able to talk to anyone about it, and since I still felt guilty for never telling her about my memories before now, I decided to tell her the truth.

"Because. . .I think Annika is a better choice. And honestly, I don't want Gabe wasting every life he has by spending it with me. I want, no, I *need* for him to be happy."

Lina snorted-loudly. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. There is no girl who could be a better choice than you."

I smiled ruefully at her compliment. Unexpectedly, Lina hugged me tightly. "We'll get you out of here," she promised. "And afterwards, you're going to get your man back."

"I don't know about all that," I told her. "But I wouldn't mind the escape part."

She pulled away, looking into my eyes. "We will definitely get you out of here. You do believe me, don't you?"

I shrugged. "I believe you'll try," I answered honestly. "But the Royals are relentless. They have me followed everywhere I go. I can't even leave my own bedroom without a guard standing around the corner."

"Trust me," she smiled. Then she whispered into my ear, "Tomorrow night."

I nodded, understanding what she meant. I hadn't realized they would try to break me out so soon. That knowledge was exciting.

"I better go," she said. "They're coming to make me leave and anyway, I'm supposed to dance tonight."

"You're dancing?" I asked, disappointed I would miss her performance.

"Sure. It's Christmas. And didn't you know, I'm famous, dahling."

I chuckled. "I see your head has grown even bigger since I last saw you. If it grows anymore, you're going to topple over from the weight."

She merely waved my comment aside. "They've asked me to dance every night that we're here. I agreed, of course. It's not often Christo allows us to visit Redwood Forest."

"Have fun," I said. "Don't let the men fight over you." She smiled at the thought. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Oh, geez. Good night, Lina." I shook my head as she left my room. I was still chuckling after she was gone.

But eventually, my world became boring again. I sighed dreamily, while staring out of my window. I wished I could venture into the camp tonight and watch Lina's performance. But I wasn't allowed out at night. According to every guard I'd ever asked before, they all told me the same thing: "It isn't safé in the camp at night."

But I knew what they really meant. They didn't allow me out after dark because they couldn't keep a good watch over me. It suddenly occurred to me it would be nighttime when Lina and my father would try to break me out. *Hmm*, I thought. *Maybe their plan will work*.

I reached for my father's package, pulling the strings off and then lifting the lid. Inside was a ceramic jewelry box. Curiously, I opened the box, knowing my father wouldn't have been so secretive about giving me a pretty jewelry box for Christmas. As it opened, I caught glimpse of something black and shiny. It was a handgun.

I smiled a little wickedly.

Thanks, Dad. You're awesome.

I put the gun away and thought no more of it. I was determined to keep it for an emergency- or my escape- and therefore I couldn't

run the risk of someone listening to my thoughts. There was a slight drizzle of rain falling outside tonight. Maybe it was a sign. Maybe it meant some luck was in store for me, after all.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Lina came the next evening as expected, promptly at dusk.

"What on earth are you wearing?" I asked incredulously as I opened my bedroom door. She was decked out from head to toe in one of her flashier dancing costumes. "Are you *trying* to look suspicious?"

She sidestepped me, closing the door from behind.

"These are my stage clothes," she said.

"I realize that, but why are you wearing them?"

She suddenly grinned widely. She had a bag with her and from within it she pulled out an auburn-colored wig.

I tilted my head to the side. "Are you serious?"

She put her hands on her hips, annoyed with me. "Do you have a better plan?" she angrily whispered. "Let's hear it then, by all means."

I narrowed my eyes at her and then snatched the wig out of her hand. "Fine," I whispered back. "But this better work."

"It will." She smiled. "Trust me."

As she changed, she told me in a warning tone, "Keep your mind on lock-down. Try not to think about what we're doing-- just in case there's anyone listening in."

I nodded, though I knew it would be nearly impossible to think of anything other than escaping.

We quickly switched outfits. I put on Lina's ridiculously gaudy costume, and she helped me with the wig by pinning it into place. Coins jangled from across the bust of the dress and also from the hip sash. The dress was a glittering gold color, which would be noticeable from a mile away.

"Oh, I almost forgot this." Lina pulled out a small, white cartridge from inside her bag. She opened it to reveal a pair of brown contacts. "For good measure," she advised me. Then she proceeded to place them into my eyes. However, getting those contacts in place was a complete nightmare. I suddenly had a much higher appreciation for my glasses.

"Oh, stop being a baby," Lina admonished me. "Your eyes are watering."

"You're *poking* me in the eye," I retorted.

We eventually got the contacts in, but the feeling was awkward. I blinked several times before they felt secure.

Afterwards, Lina took out a bottle of kohl from her bag and she drew a heavy line along my upper lids. Then she brushed on several coats of mascara, added blush to my cheeks and a heavy dousing of gloss to my lips.

"Perfect!" Lina applauded herself as she looked me over.

I turned to the nearby mirror so I could see the results for myself.

I was barely recognizable.

"Wow. This may actually work."

Lina grinned again. "You'll pass for me easily enough as long as nobody looks at you too closely."

I twirled in front of the mirror, attempting to view myself from behind. Voicing my thoughts aloud, I muttered, "I look like a tramp."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Lina began to tap her foot. "You better take that back right now or I'll make sure a black eye goes with your new look!"

I glanced up to find her wearing a very angry expression and I realized my blunder. "Oh, I mean-- not that you looked like one. I just meant it's a little risqué, that's all. I don't think of you as a tramp, promise."

I smiled now, trying to mellow the mood.

Lina only snorted and mumbled an aggrieved, "Uh, huh," underneath her breath.

"So what's the plan?" I asked, attempting to change the subject.

"Once you're out of the castle, you meet Christo where the river meets the pond. There's a car waiting for you there."

"What about you?" I asked. "What happens to you when they realize I'm missing?"

"Nothing. I'm going to leave an hour after you do. The guards rotate their posts in exactly an hour from now. The new guard will never know I've already left the room. And if they do, I'll be able to see it coming. So far, so good. I see you getting out of the castle."

"Really?" My voice held excitement now.

"Yes," she assured me. "But you need to leave now."

"Wait." I kneeled down to pull out the handgun from underneath the bedroll. I hid it within a fold of my skirt.

"Christo sneak that in for you?" Lina asked.

I nodded.

"Try not to think about it. Pretend it's not even with you. Unless you need it, of course."

I smiled. "Of course," I mimicked her. I wrapped my arms around Lina for a quick hug. "Thanks for everything," I said.

"You're welcome. Oh, there's one more thing-- try to look confident. Just try to believe you're me. And. . .break a leg."

"Okay." I nodded. I took one deep breath and exhaled slowly before turning the doorknob.

Here goes nothing, I thought to myself.

I imagined I must feel the way shoplifters feel when they leave a store with their stash of goods hidden in their bags or pockets. It was certainly a rush, but I tried my best to stay calm. I kept my eyes straight ahead of me and continued to put one foot in front of the other at a normal pace.

You are Lina. You are Lina. You are Lina, I kept reminding myself with each step.

Passing the first guard was the most difficult. He stood at post by the entrance to the west wing. I tried not to look at him, but I could feel his eyes staring me down. I looked up, seeing I was correct; his eyes were locked upon me. A deep fear enveloped me as if I had been caught red-handed. The guard just smiled and nodded me onwards. I

smiled back and kept moving. I tried not to let out my sigh of my relief until I was far removed from this place.

I continued on in this manner. I found myself holding my breath next to each guard I passed. But none of them said a word to me. I supposed they had all recognized Lina's dress from when she'd come into the castle earlier. Finally, once I'd passed the great hall, I could see the main entrance coming into view. My heart started racing. I am going to get away with this, I thought. The door is right there!

I passed through the doorway without looking back. As soon as the outside air hit me, I breathed a long sigh of relief. *I did it!* It was almost impossible to believe.

Now that I was out of the castle, however, I had no time to waste. I immediately picked up my pace because every moment was precious. I needed to get as far away from here as I could while I had the chance.

I worked my way into the camp, weaving my way through the crowds. There were people everywhere. The farther I immersed myself into the camp, the harder it was to get through. My anxiety began to increase as I pushed my way forward. And it didn't help that I was being noticed everywhere I went in Lina's gaudy dress.

There were some juvenile boys who blew whistles as I hurried by. One of them even grabbed my arm in order to gain my attention, but I snatched it away and rushed to move on.

There was a fire breather to my left, with a large audience surrounding him. He caught my attention just as he blew a rippling wave of flames into the audience. He wanted to frighten everyone

without doing any real harm. It had the startling affect he'd intended and everyone stepped back before cheering him on. Distracted by the fire breather's performance, I accidentally ran directly into someone as they were stepping backwards.

"Hey, watch where you're going!"

I looked up, seeing I had run into an immensely large woman who was wearing too much makeup and a furious expression.

Although once she got a good look at me, her anger rapidly disappeared.

"Oh, it's you!" she said. "We have been looking for you everywhere. It's Lina, right?"

I cleared my throat. "Yep. My name is Lina." I tried my best to sound very confident about that.

"Oh, good. Come with me." The woman motioned for me to follow her.

Confused, I trailed along after her. It was really aggravating, especially in the middle of my getaway attempt. But I figured it would seem suspicious if I chose not to follow her, especially if there was somewhere Lina was supposed to be right now.

I tried to lose the woman a few times by keeping a slower pace, but she kept glancing behind her, hurrying me along. The woman was persistent, determined to get me (well, Lina) to wherever we were headed.

Eventually, she led me to a large wooden platform. I followed her up a set of steps that ran along the backside of it, which ventured into the makeshift building. She opened the door and ushered me inside.

"Quickly," she said to me for the tenth time since we'd been walking. She was proving to be *very* annoying.

"I'm coming," I muttered.

As soon as we were inside, we were bombarded with people.

"Thank heavens, you've found her!" The man who announced this rushed to my side.

"Where have you been?" he asked. Before I had the chance to make up an excuse, he abruptly cut me off. "It doesn't matter. There's no time. Here, take these." He stuffed a pair of cymbals into my palms.

"What are these for?" I asked dumbly.

"Haha," he laughed, displaying his set of gold teeth. "You're cute."

A girl to my left began powdering my cheeks, while another one straightened my sash. Someone else began to fasten bangles to my ankles and wrists.

"What is going on here?" I asked the room of people, but no one was paying any attention to what I was saying. They all seemed to be rushing about in a scurried frenzy.

"Okay!" the man with the gold teeth shouted. He swung me around by my shoulders to face him, giving me a once-over. He brought his fingers to his mouth and kissed them in the same manner as an Italian chef. "Voila! You look absolutely stunning!"

He turned me away from him and pushed me towards what I thought was a wall, until I noticed the gleam of light moving from underneath. It was a set of curtains. . .

It suddenly dawned on me what was happening.

"Oh no, you've got the wrong girl for this!" I exclaimed.

I decided then and there that I preferred to be caught and punished. I'd gladly spend my whole freaking life here if that was what it took, rather than to go out on stage in front of people.

The man behind me laughed again. "She's funny," he mentioned to whoever was standing next to him. Then, he pushed me hard into the curtains. "You're on, draga! Knock 'em dead!"

The stage lights immediately lit upon me while I stared motionlessly into the crowd of onlookers. "Oh, God," I groaned miserably. "This can't be happening."

Someone with a microphone announced, "Here she is, Miss Lina Drynski, famed belly dancer extraordinaire!"

How was this possible? Lina would have seen it coming...it suddenly occurred to me that while she was wishing me luck, she had also said to "break a leg." What a miserable friend! She had known and hadn't warned me. Note to self: Strangle Lina to death.

The crowd cheered as some music started blaring from nearby speakers. I turned behind me and caught a glimpse of the man with the gold teeth peeking through the curtains. He was waving frantically, motioning me to begin the dance.

"I don't know which one I'm performing!" I yelled to him. "The *Ghawazee*!" he yelled back.

As soon as he named the style, the steps to the dance filled my mind. *This will be okay*, I thought, trying to keep myself calm. I'd practiced the Ghawazee style numerous times with Lina, probably more than any other kind of dance. *I can do this*, I reassured myself. I couldn't panic. The dance called for sensuality and slowly controlled movements. The appearance of panic would ruin the fluidity I needed to create.

I took one deep breath and closed my eyes. *Here goes nothing*, I thought. I lifted my hands in the air, pulling my right hip upwards, holding it there and waiting for the next beat.

As soon as it resounded, I dropped my hip, beginning the dance. I heard the roar of the crowd's cheer again, but I didn't open my eyes just yet. I pretended like they weren't there. I acted like it was only me and Lina, practicing in some quiet studio.

As I lifted my hip up and down with the beat, I slowly turned my arm, keeping my thumb and index finger held together for an added touch of beauty, keeping the cymbals closed between them. I could feel my muscles scream because I hadn't performed the dance in so long; the movement required perfect precision. Though it was difficult, it had to appear seamless, as if my arms were mere ribbons, fluttering softly and slowly in the breeze. I glanced to my left, keeping my eyes halfway closed and peering out from beneath my lashes.

I kept my face expressionless, but I was ridiculously happy because I'd executed the movement perfectly. I figured if I could still

pull off the arm movements, I could probably get through the rest of the dance, too.

Since the beat was still slow and tribal-like, I placed my arms over my head and lifted my chest. I dropped it suddenly to my right side, and then downwards, and then to the left, and finally upwards. A perfect diamond. Then I moved faster, until I was isolating my rib cage and creating a rapid chest circle.

I heard the shrill cry of the *zaghareet* as the music picked up. I dropped my hip into a shimmy and began to twirl about the stage. The crowd continued to cheer and so I finally let myself open my eyes. As I realized that I was actually pulling this off, I smiled. My small, gleeful smile stayed plastered to my face as I continued the rest of the dance.

Bizarrely, while I danced, several images popped into my mind of other dances I'd performed during my past lives. I guess Dakota was right, after all; I had done this before. Confidence filled me as I remembered all my old performances. I really wished I would have felt the same confidence ten minutes ago, though I supposed it was better late than never.

I took a bow as the dance came to an end, breathing heavily. As I looked out into the cheering crowd, I noticed the strangest thing. It almost looked like Gabe was there. I thought I saw the familiar lines of his face, but the figure turned and became lost in the crowd.

I shook the spooky feeling away, sincerely hoping my constant longing to see Gabe hadn't caused me to start hallucinating.

As soon as I walked backstage, everyone swarmed over me again. The man with the gold teeth stood on his toes to reach my forehead. There, he planted a kiss. "You were wonderful, draga! Simply spectacular!"

"Thank you," I told him.

"Would you like to encore the audience with a tribal fusion dance?"

I grimaced. "Ugh, I'd love to, but I gotta run. Sorry!"

Dozens of people backstage approached me as I made my way towards the exit, but I ignored them all as I shouted out another apology. Eventually, I made my way to the door and quickly retreated. I hurried down the steps, realizing how late it had become. I bet my father suspected our plan had failed. I hoped he would still be waiting for me by the pond.

"Lola, stop!"

Horrified at hearing my own name called out, I turned around to see who had spotted me. I was startled as I did; however, and I actually jumped backwards.

Both Cam and Gabe were running to catch up with me. They had come from around the corner of the stage, slowing to a stop when they reached me.

"What are you guys doing here?" I murmured the question.

"And how did you recognize me?"

I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me. I wondered if this was all an imaginary attempt to sabotage myself in some hugely insane way. "Gabe knew it was you as soon as he saw you." Cam smiled brilliantly. "And we came to rescue you. This is the second time, I might add. Just so you know, you've met your quota on rescues for the year."

I wasn't paying much attention to Cam because I couldn't take my eyes off of Gabe.

He was scowling at me. I decided I couldn't possibly be imagining this. If this was my own personal fantasy, Gabe would take me in his arms and kiss me. Or something along those lines, anyway. But it certainly wouldn't involve scowling.

Eventually, I managed to pull my eyes away from Gabe and back to Cam.

"Well, that's very nice of you both. But as you can see, I was in the middle of rescuing myself."

I didn't even have the full sentence out of my mouth before I felt a hand snake across my upper arm. I looked up to see a guard behind me. He jerked me towards him.

"Over here," he shouted. "I've found her."

"How?" I asked.

The guard grinned eerily. He pointed to my forehead. "We read your mind."

Before I knew what was happening, Gabe managed to slam his fist into the guard's stomach, causing the man to double over in pain.

"Run, Lo!" Cam shouted, motioning me to follow him. Without thinking twice, I picked up my skirt and started running as fast as I could, trying to keep up with Cam.

I heard someone shout, "She went that way!" from behind me, so I ran even faster.

But running through the crowd had its issues. There were too many damned people in the way. Cam reached back for my hand, and as soon as he grabbed it, he yanked me forward. He tugged me along with him, dodging people left and right. Soon we came close to the river, and I knew where Cam's thoughts were headed.

"We're not swimming for it, are we?" I shouted. "I'm covered with coins and sequins-- I'll sink straight to the bottom!"

"Try to jump to cover as much distance as you can," Cam yelled over his shoulder.

"Great plan," I shouted back sarcastically.

As we neared the edge, we picked up speed and I lifted my skirt higher. "Don't jump till I say," Cam told me through heavy breaths.

We were almost at the edge of the bank when Cam finally shouted, "Now!" Jumping at the same time, we crashed into the icy water. The strong currents pushed me downstream and I fought to get my bearings. As soon as I felt the shallow ground beneath me, I pushed up hard, gasping for breath as I came through the trough.

"Lo, grab my hand!" Cam called to me.

I couldn't see him, blinded by the water, though I reached out towards the sound of his voice. I felt him seize my wrist and pull me along to the bank with him. I used my other arm to help him swim against the current. But after running for so long, I was exhausted and didn't have much strength left.

Cam pushed me to the shore first. I clutched for the ground, clawing at the dirt to pull myself up. It was difficult because I was weighed down from my soaking wet costume. As soon as I was completely out of the water, I turned around to help Cam, but he was already halfway out. I merely helped him pull himself the rest of the way.

We both took a moment to catch our breaths and I dimly noticed my wig floating downstream. The rushing water tossed it violently against the rocks until the auburn strands sank to their demise. I wondered how close I'd come to meeting the same fate.

Cam cut the break shorter than I would have liked. "Come on," he told me. "There's no time. They can read our every move."

He helped me to my feet and then we began to jog again. My muscles screamed in protest.

"If we can just make it to the clearing ahead, there's an SUV parked there."

"Okay," I breathed and I pushed myself to move faster.

We both noticed the guards coming at us from the left. And as soon as we turned to the right, we saw they were coming at us from that angle, also.

Cam and I both paused in our tracks. We didn't have anywhere to run.

"You are ordered to stay where you are!" one of them yelled.

"Oh, hell," Cam muttered beneath his breath. "Like there's anywhere we could go if we wanted to."

Within moments, we were swarmed by guards. Thinking fast, I removed the small pistol from the inside of my dress, thankful to find it still intact. I pulled Cam towards me and held the gun to his head.

"This man is my prisoner! I will shoot him if I have to- so back off right now!"

"Are you crazy?" Cam whispered furiously.

"Just go with it," I whispered back.

One of the guards laughed loudly. He moved, standing directly in front of us. "Do you want me to save you the trouble, little girl?" he asked me derisively. "Because I'll gladly shoot him for you. His life is worth less than nothing in comparison to your capture."

"He's a Royal," I emphasized the word.

But the guard didn't seem to care. He only shrugged. "He's an abandoner. Most would be happy to have him dead."

"Do you wanna let me go *now*?" Cam grumbled. He'd become stiff after the guard mentioned the word 'abandoner.'

I groaned miserably and pushed Cam out of the way. I had no choice but to surrender myself.

THIRTY-EIGHT

"Lola Moori, you are hereby charged with attempting escape and defying Queen Bonjara's orders against you. How do you plead?"

"Guilty." I ground this out defiantly. Apparently, the Bonjara Queen had departed two days ago, which left me in the hands of another Gabor. This time, I was dealing with King Victor, who I'd always thought was a fair and just Royal, but I would be damned if I was going to sob for mercy to anyone for trying to leave Redwood Forest. They had to know they were being unreasonable. Any gypsy would agree with me on this point.

Victor motioned his advisor to step aside and he stood before me. Behind me, several guards secured Gabe to the ground. He'd been detained for throwing a punch to Prince Tiberius's jaw. The prince had purposefully riled him, degrading the Constantin family with seedy insults from the moment he laid eyes on Cam and Gabe. "All hail the return of the mighty *princes*," Tiberius taunted them. When an awkward silence spread over the room, he continued in his droll tone of voice by adding, "I guess everyone here prefer your retirement to Florida. But honestly, we all believed you'd be more creative."

Gabe hadn't put up with this for long before he started swinging. The guards had tackled him to the ground, but not before he'd managed to bloody Tiberius's upper lip. Several Royals tried to

calm the prince while he fumed in the far corner of the hall, his pride more wounded than anything else.

"Relax, Lola. I can see the tension in your shoulders." I dragged my attention away from the angry prince and turned back towards the residing King.

Victor motioned for me to take a seat on a nearby pillow. His casualty seemed strange, especially considering the amount of people observing us within the confines of the great hall. The room was full of Royals, guards and random spectators. I supposed the king was used to the attention, but it still felt increasingly uncomfortable to me. I hesitantly took a seat in front of the king, hoping this trial would be over soon. Let them throw me back in my jail. I didn't care at this point; I simply wanted everything to be over.

"I've heard the rumors about your mind," he continued in a soft, relaxing voice. There was something about him that put me at ease, though I wasn't quite sure what it was. "It seems your memories will unlock the secret hiding place for the crystal primus."

"Unfortunately, I've heard the same rumors."

"That's a big burden on your shoulders, Miss Moori. How are you handling it?"

I blinked, surprised by the question. No one had ever asked me that question before. I wasn't sure how to answer the king.

"I'm...okay. I guess. I try not to delve into my memories very much. No one wants me to."

The king appeared to be considering what I said. As if it mattered to him. I wondered if it did matter to him.

"At your age, I was trying to figure out who I was as a person. I looked to all my past lives for guidance, wisdom. I desperately needed that knowledge, trying to mold myself into a decent king. I believe the inability to look to one's past is a tragedy, whether you are Royal or common."

I shifted on my pillow. Victor was sympathizing with me. The act itself was hard for me to process.

"Anyway," he continued. "It may be true that you are guilty-you did attempt escape against Queen Bonjara's orders."

Great, I thought. There goes my tiny dash of hope.

"Under normal circumstances, these charges would cause for a severe sentencing. However, I am willing to offer you clemency. Lola Moori, you are hereby pardoned of all charges. And since the departure of Queen Bonjara, my first official act of residing King is to relinquish you of her orders. You are free to go."

My jaw was left hanging open, along with everyone else's who was present at the end of Victor's speech. I even heard several gasps resound in sync with one another. Baffled, I wondered for a few seconds whether I just heard the man correctly.

The protests started almost immediately- namely from Tiberius. "You can't be serious, Uncle!" he declared, wide-eyed with outrage.

Victor didn't even acknowledge his nephew. Instead, he directed to me, "You may want to leave as soon as possible. I don't know how long I'll be in Redwood Forest, and the next Royal may hand out different orders."

Mindlessly, I stammered, "How d-do I know I won't be summoned again?"

He merely waved my fears aside. "It's like a double jeopardy of sorts. You can't be summoned for the same reason twice. We also like to trust each other's judgment. Well, most of the time. Bonjara might have a hard time swallowing it, but I think after listening to reason, she'll come around."

I nodded. The feeling of giddiness began to set in and everything felt more real to me. This *was* actually happening. I caught Gabe's expression out of the corner of my eye. He looked just about as dumbfounded as I was, yet relieved, too.

"Just promise me something?" Victor asked me suddenly.

"Anything."

"Should your memories reoccur, let us know immediately. Let me be the first person you call. Don't wait for our readers to pick up on your thoughts. Surely, by then it will have been too late."

"Of course," I breathed. "I'll call you first, before anyone. You have my word."

Victor smiled. "Good," he said. "But let's hope that doesn't ever have to happen. For everyone's sake."

THIRTY-NINE

The quiet hum of the background noise in Henri Coanda Airport was like a balm for my previously chaotic senses. It wasn't busy today- an added bonus. Very few travelers roamed the otherwise empty hallways. Most people walked with ease, nothing rushing them. I suppose Wednesday afternoons didn't bring in much traffic.

The weather was also in alignment with the aura of the airport. It was dreary and rainy, almost gloomy-like. But although the dismal scene seemed bleak, there was some nameless energy in Terminal C which enchanted me. I felt excited, giddy. Like the world seemed full of great possibilities once again. Or, I don't know, maybe my reaction had simply been born from the feeling of going somewhere.

Christo leaned down to kiss the top of my head. The gesture seemed very fatherly. It stuck out to me, but in a nice way. Christo had never been one to be "fatherly."

"Are you sure this is really what you want?"

"Yes." I nodded to reaffirm my statement. "It feels right."

He shook his head for the hundredth time in disbelief.

"Clearwater, eh? I figured if you ever did stick around in one place for a while, it would be somewhere exciting. The gulf coast doesn't even bring in good waves."

I smiled, amused by his shock over my decision.

"This isn't about the Constantin, is it?" He nodded his head in Gabe's direction. I turned to view Gabe a couple of rows away from me. He was leaned back in his chair with his hat pulled down over his eyes, sleeping.

I turned back to my father. "No, it's not about Gabe," I answered, sighing. "I wish it could be so simple."

"Then what is it about?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It just feels right, I guess."

He shook his head, confused, slightly dismayed, but ultimately accepting it for what it was.

"I'll never fully understand you, Lo. No matter how long I've known you, you always manage to dumbfound me."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Nope. I guess it's why I love you. I think I'm supposed to learn something from you. Maybe that's why we've been eternally linked."

I smiled. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, kiddo."

He hugged me once more and then he left, disappearing down the white-washed hallways. My mood turned a little morose after he walked out of my line of vision. My father was gone for good. I wondered when I would ever see him again.

Gabe, Cam and I proceeded to check-in through security a while later. Soon, we were all on board our plane. Gabe gave me the window seat and Cam took the aisle. I suppose it was good that I was

beside Gabe. There were things I needed to say. I only hoped I could figure out a way to verbalize them.

Cam almost immediately fell asleep after takeoff. Gabe mentioned plane rides always knocked him out. It was a perfect opportunity to say the things that needed to be said. But for some reason, we kept dodging the important issues. Instead we only spoke about random topics.

"Where are your parents?"

I think my question surprised Gabe, or maybe caught him offguard. But he answered me without questioning the source of my curiosity.

"My father died when I was young. I don't remember much about him. My mother is alive and well. She visits every now and then. Or we'll sometimes visit her."

"Where is she?"

"She lives amongst one of the troupes. She won't give up that life. It's too hard for her to stay in one place." Gabe paused because the plane flew through some turbulence.

I looked up to see the fasten seat belt sign had been turned on and I waited for the trembles to come to an end.

I suddenly felt Gabe's hand grasp mine. I looked down, noticing I'd been clenching the arms of the seat.

"Nervous?" he asked me.

"No," I promptly replied, but I didn't pull my hand away from his. The turbulence eventually came to end, thankfully, and I relaxed against my seat.

He seemed amused, for whatever reason, and this annoyed me.

"I know what you're thinking and I'm not afraid of flying," I informed him.

"I wasn't thinking that at all."

"Well...good."

A few moments passed quietly before either of us said anything again.

"She adored you, you know."

"Your mother?" I asked.

He nodded. "I've known her for several lifetimes. She isn't always my mother, but she is always closely related somehow. A sister, an aunt. . .she's always been there. And anyway, the two of you got along famously."

I smiled now. I had often wondered if things would have been different had my mother lived into an old age, and what it would have been like having her around. I wondered if Christo would have been at all different.

"Is she the same mother whom the Royals murdered?" The question surprised both of us because it was clear I'd remembered that information from another lifetime. Gabe hadn't mentioned it to me in this one.

"Yes," he said solemnly. "She died at their hands, which is why she keeps her identity a secret to this day."

"I vaguely remember you telling me that she was powerful."

"It's true. She has a very strong instinct. In fact, I've never seen anyone who compares, not even your Aunt Zetta. I think my mother

even knew she would be murdered long before the actual crime was committed."

"Then why didn't she stop it from happening?"

"I don't know. She would never tell me and she still doesn't like to talk about it. But truthfully, I believe it's because she wanted Baro and me to get out. I think she wants the Royal families separated."

"That's really strange," I noted.

"Yeah. I guess so. I don't know why she wanted us separated, but knowing my mother, there's a reason for everything she does."

For a moment, Gabe seemed far away, lost in thought. I wasn't sure if I should keep asking him about such a sensitive subject, but he didn't seem uncomfortable- only pensive. And I was really, really curious.

"She has a theory, you know," Gabe spoke again a few moments later. He was looking at me now; his dark gray eyes were fixed on mine. "About why gypsies are the way they are. Do you want to hear it?"

"Sure," I replied.

"Most gypsies think we're blessed, especially the Royals. But she doesn't think so. She thinks we're cursed."

Intrigued now, I asked, "How so?"

"Think about it. You probably know of wealthy gypsies. But do you know of any that are renowned? Do you know any gypsies who became famous leaders? Presidents? Scientists? Do you know any famous writers, actors, singers?"

I contemplated on it, searching my mind for someone I knew who'd received any of the titles he mentioned.

"My friend Lina is a belly dancer," I pointed out. "She has over a million hits on YouTube."

He shook his head. "Bigger than that, Lo. Can you think of a gypsy whose name will be remembered throughout the ages?"

"I guess not," I said, giving up.

"It's because we are an apathetic people. We don't care about life the way normal people do. Normal people strive to solve the next big equation, creating technology or writing the next great novel. But we don't strive for anything. We all know we'll just end up dying and the cycle will start all over again. We don't care about leaving legacies."

I thought about what he'd said. I guess in a way, he was right. "Then what are we doing here?" I asked him.

"That's the big question. And that's why we're cursed. We go through life searching for the meaning of it all. We wander aimlessly, headed for the next place or person who might give us some answers. I would say it's wanderlust that drives us, but I don't think that's the right word." I watched as his eyes grew hazy. "No...I think it's more of a wander-love. In a way, we understand what's most important. In a way, normal people don't see the world as clearly as we do. But then again, they haven't been as jaded, either."

I frowned. "That's kind of sad."

"It's our burden to bear," he told me. "My mother believes there is a reason we carry it. And it's another reason why I agreed to let you

go on with your lives, without remembering who you are. I wanted you to feel the small thrills of life."

"I think it was there, anyway," I admitted. "Nothing fazes me. I never wanted to forget anything, especially you."

Something flashed in Gabe's eyes, but he quickly looked away. "I'm sorry it didn't work out as I had hoped."

"Don't be," I said and placed my hand over his. The touch startled us both and he stared at our hands. I quickly took mine back and breathed in a deep breath.

I hadn't even thought about my actions as they were happening. Reaching for Gabe's hand came so naturally. Like I'd done it a million times.

I knew I couldn't keep pretending in front of him. Pretending I didn't miss him after a century apart. Pretending I didn't love him...pretending I could exist without him. I wished I were brave enough to tell him that. Instead, I merely closed my eyes and let myself fall asleep.

Later, I awoke with my head crooked into Gabe's shoulder, his arm around me. We were landing. I lifted my head and drew myself away from him again. I wondered if it was the last time I'd ever touch or speak to him again.

FORTY

I was groggy while walking up the porch steps to my grandmother's beach house. The long plane ride had left me really jetlagged. At the same time, it felt nice coming back to Clearwater. There were things I hadn't realized I would miss so much. Like the roar of the ocean waves, the salt in the air, the breezes...I guessed that meant this was becoming home to me now.

Home.

It was such a strange word.

"So, how long are you staying for this time?"

Miriam was waiting by the door. It was barely seven o'clock in the morning, but she'd known my flight would arrive this early. I'd called and left her a voicemail about it yesterday.

I was a little intimidated by the prospect of facing her. I wasn't exactly sure how she would react to my coming back here.

"Actually, I'd like to stay permanently- if that's okay with you."

I watched as the corners of my grandmother's mouth curved into a sly smile. In that one small smile, all my fears were immediately put to rest. "I like that idea," she told me. "Of course, you'll have to go back to school."

I gave her a little salute. "Straight away." She nodded. "Okay, then, it's settled." "Thanks, Grams."

"Child, you don't have to thank me for something you never had to ask me for in the first place."

I smiled back at her. It suddenly occurred to her to ask me, "So, Christo is okay with you being here?"

"Well, he isn't exactly thrilled by the idea. But amazingly, he's letting me make this choice for myself."

"Well, I'll be damned."

"I know, right? He's almost a decent and respectable person now. He said being in jail gave him 'perspective.'"

My grandmother snorted. "I wouldn't go *that* far. Your father can put his boots in the oven, but that don't make 'em biscuits."

It was way too early in the morning to try to understand Miriam's idioms, so I just smiled and we walked inside.

"Speaking of biscuits, Grams, I'm a little hungry. Do you mind if I cook something?"

"Sure," she said. "I'll help you. I've been kind of liberal with my grocery shopping these days and I actually have some carbs stocked up in the fridge."

"Nice."

Miriam and I cooked pancakes together. The house was quiet and the only sounds came from the clanking of dishes, the sizzling of the frying pan and other kitchen sounds.

We ate together around the island. Neither of us said anything until we finished our plates.

"I haven't had a good pancake in over a year," Miriam told me.

I smiled. "They were pretty delicious," I said.

Silence filled the air again. I heard the noise of someone moving around upstairs.

Annika.

My throat constricted whenever I thought of her.

I think Miriam caught me looking towards the ceiling because she knew the direction my thoughts were headed.

"She's okay with you coming back," Miriam said to me softly.
"In fact, I think she's relieved."

"Why on earth would she be relieved?"

"I think she feels guilty."

"For what?"

"She knew about your abduction, Lolá. Before it happened. She saw Gorge coming to your school in her dream and she found out he was the one who had broken into the school. He was searching for your records. Since she knew Gabe would eventually find you, she didn't try and stop it from happening."

I gulped my orange juice, trying to avoid the anger from washing over me. I was through being upset with Annika.

Miriam continued by telling me, "She didn't know you would be tortured, Lo. She feels incredibly sorry about that. Like I told you before, she's not a horrible person. She was simply going through a hard time."

I nodded and forced myself to smile. "I understand."

FORTY-ONE

A few nights had passed since I'd come home, which was still a weird way for me to think of this place. It was the weekend and I would be starting school on Monday. I desperately hoped I could catch up. Miriam already mentioned I would likely have to enroll myself in summer school- a prospect which had me groaning. I'd wanted to spend at least part of my summer visiting my father and my old troupe. But I wasn't sure if that could happen now.

I walked the beach every night also, casting wary glances at the Constantin mansion. I think I hoped maybe Gabe would see me in his line of vision and come to see me. But he didn't- which was good. I didn't know what I'd say to him, anyway.

"You're moping," Miriam pointed out to me. We'd just eaten dinner and she caught me scrubbing the same dish for a long time. I quickly rinsed it and picked up another as if nothing were wrong.

"What do you mean? I was just daydreaming or something," I said, trying to laugh it off.

She raised a skeptical brow.

"You better just go and speak with him. Get it over with."

I dropped my dish now and turned off the hot water. "What are you talking about, Grams? I was just doing the dishes."

"You know what I'm talking about, Lo."

I crossed my arms, frustrated. I decided to give up my pretense act of being okay. "I thought you didn't think it was safe for me to be around him. So why do you suddenly think I should go talk to him?"

"It is safer when you're not around him. But in my opinion, you're going to remember your past whether you're around him or not. You may as well be happy with the time you've got, even if it's only a short time."

With that said, Miriam left the room, leaving me to contemplate what I should do. I was more confused than ever. For the time being, I decided I would do nothing. Besides, Gabe hadn't made an effort to see me since we'd come back. I was sure he'd seen me walking close to his house. Maybe he didn't care as much anymore. And maybe that was a good thing.

Sadly, I finished the dishes and headed upstairs to my bedroom. I stayed awake all night, thinking about things. I remembered so many happier times with Gabe. The two of us laughing over silly jokes, dancing to countless songs and watching thousands of sunsets together. I remembered Gabe playing the piano while I listened from my window seat, smiling. I remembered reading to Gabe from my books while he rested his head in my lap. I remembered our beautiful children, and their children. I remembered exotic places the two of us visited together, exploring and finding new adventures.

I remembered happiness.

FORTY-TWO

"Just breathe," I said to myself. "You're going to go through with this."

I'd made up my mind. After a night of hardly any sleep, I decided I would follow my heart. I would tell Gabe how I felt, and I prayed he still felt the same way.

I was so nervous, walking along the docks and heading towards Gabe's boat. My feet felt much heavier, too. Like bricks. I forced myself to walk faster, before I changed my mind and ran back to the house.

I heard a familiar voice laughing as I neared the boat. It was a woman's voice. A ball of anxiety began to form in the pit of my stomach. I turned past a corner and saw the side of Gabe's body from where I stood. My feet slowed.

Gabe was wearing his khaki cargo shorts, a brown leather belt, and no shirt. His abdomen muscles contracted as if he were laughing hard about something. I moved closer to him, taking one step at a time. . .until I finally saw her.

It was Annika. My stomach felt like it dropped out from under me and my throat seemed to swell up instantly. It had been her voice I heard laughing. She continued to giggle even now.

Gabe turned towards me suddenly. He hadn't even noticed me coming through his mind sight, he'd been so distracted by Annika. Realizing this made me wish he hadn't seen me at all.

His lazy grin disappeared when he saw my expression.

Feeling ashamed for letting him catch me there, I turned away and walked back in the direction I'd come from. I didn't know what else to do. My breath wavered as I inhaled deeply a few times- it was a lame attempt at trying to keep the tears away. My eyes watered anyway.

"Lola, wait!"

Gabe was calling me from behind. I looked back to see he was running barefoot towards me on the wooden dock.

I kept walking, though I slowed my pace, allowing him to catch up with me.

"It's okay," I said as soon he reached my side. "You don't have to explain anything."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Did you-- did you think that me and Anni. . ." He paused to let out a nervous laugh. "Anni and I aren't back together, Lo."

I stopped walking, crossing my hands over my chest. The sun was a little blinding, but his perfect body glimmered through the yellow rays and I couldn't tear my eyes away. It was enough to make any girl uneasy. My gaze traveled down the length of him, until I realized what was happening and I snapped my head back up. I decided to keep my attention on his face only.

"Yes, but you've clearly made up with her. That's a step forward. And it's a good thing-- I want you both to be happy." My voice broke a little at the end and I looked away.

Gabe forced me to face him, tilting my chin in his direction. He kept his sparkling gray eyes locked upon me, his mouth curving at the corners. It was almost a smile, but not quite.

"You still love me, admit it."

I stubbornly squared my shoulders and narrowed my eyes. "I've moved on and so should you," I blatantly lied.

"I want to hear you admit it, Lo."

"Go back to Annika, Gabe. You belong with her. . .you deserve someone like her."

I tried to walk away again, but Gabe grabbed my arm and pulled me to him, until I was so close that his scent alone intoxicated my senses.

"Annika came by my boat today to tell me that she no longer harbors any resentment over the broken engagement. She was only trying to make nice."

I looked him in the eyes. He was telling the truth. "So why did *you* come here?" he asked me.

I shrugged, forgetting my reasons for coming. I felt like an idiot. "I just wanted to say thank you for going to Redwood Forest to help me."

His gray eyes hardened. He seemed disappointed with my answer. "Don't mention it."

Though it seemed like we were done with this conversation, he didn't let go of my arm.

As difficult as it was to admit, I told Gabe, "You look right together, you know. Even if that's not what Annika came here for, I know she'd take you back in an instant."

Gabe sighed, a heavy sound. He moved even closer to me, which I hadn't thought was possible. Startlingly, he pulled me completely up against him so I could feel his every rippling muscle through my clothes and along my own body.

He gathered my long hair into his hands, leaning over me and breathing in my scent. He took my face between his hands and stared intently into my eyes.

"I only want you," he breathed. "I deserve you, Lo. And you deserve me, too."

I sighed, and my anxiety seemed to dissipate after hearing his declaration. I wondered if he was right. Could it even be possible for me to deserve Gabe?

I only knew I no longer had a choice in the matter.

"Say it, Lo," he practically growled, his agitation increasing.

"All right. *All right*," I allowed, finally giving in. "It's true, I love you."

He grinned. His instant happiness caused my heart to skip a beat. I knew I wanted to look at that happy grin for the rest of my life, and all of my lives. I wanted to be the one to put it there again and again.

"Good," he told me. "Because I happen to love you, too. I have since you first came to my rescue during that night of the storm, several lifetimes ago. My feelings haven't weakened since then; they've only increased with time. I've loved you in every life, whether we were together or not. And on the day you came storming up here, complaining about those damn cans I planted, I knew my feelings would never change. Even then, I knew there was no use trying to make a new life for myself. Any life without you is meaningless."

His words were so lovely, so perfect. . .confusion spread across my features as it dawned on me *exactly* what he said. "You planted those cans along the beach?"

He winced as he realized his slip-up. "Let's not ruin a perfect moment--"

"Do you know how long it took me to clean those up?" I yelled.

"How else was I supposed to get you to come to me? I wanted to see you again. And you didn't even recognize me at the time!"

"But you were rude!" I argued.

He grimaced. "Yeah, I was having an internal battle with myself. Sorry about that."

I angled my face upwards, holding a hand over my eyes to block the sunlight so I could get a better view of his expression. "What kind of internal battle?"

Gabe shrugged. "You know, it was the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other shoulder sort of situation."

Despite my anger, I smiled at his analogy.

"On one hand, I wanted you," he continued. "And on the other, I was mad at myself for compromising your memories."

"Which side did you end up choosing: the devil or the angel?"

"Well. . .I ended up choosing the devil. But it turns out the devil isn't so bad, after all. He's got kind of an angelic streak to him."

I laughed now. My earlier anger faded completely. I finally understood why he'd been so abominably rude to me on the day I met him. I'd thought of Gabe as a conceited snob. But I guess I had been very, very wrong. So much for any magical gypsy instincts I may or may not have possessed.

Later that day, Gabe decided to take his boat out for a short test drive. He asked me to come along, and I happily agreed.

Stepping aboard, I glanced at the name *Sea Lily* etched along the side panel. It dawned on me that Gabe had named his boat for me. I smiled at the thought.

"It looks nice," I noted while looking around. "Though it could use some new paint on the outside. Maybe a bright turquoise. Or a canary yellow."

He started up the engine and asked me, "Do you want to help me paint it?"

I sat down on the nearest seat to him and grinned. "I could possibly see that happening in your future."

"Oh, so you do have a crystal ball."

"Nope," I told him, shaking my head. "And not a stitch of good instincts, either. So you better just hope for the best."

He chuckled as he pulled out of the marina. He drove slowly, until we reached the point where the speed limit increased. "Hang on," said, before pushing the lever to full speed. I jerked backwards, but caught myself on the back of my chair.

The little boat's acceleration was quick. We were practically flying along the water. The boat crashed up and down as the ocean spray misted over us. The wind caused my hair to fly everywhere, but I didn't care. I loved it. I was beginning to understand why Gabe didn't feel the constant need to be on the move- because he already was. Boating, surfing and simply living next to the ocean in general was enough for him. It freed his spirit, like it was freeing mine now.

After a long ride through the gulf at full speed, Gabe finally slowed the boat down and we headed back to the marina just as the sun was setting. We simply sat there for a long while, staring out into the water. Gabe moved to sit next to me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I smiled because it felt so normal, like I was used to him touching me.

"Are you worried?" he asked me.

"A little," I admitted. "But I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it, right?"

"We'll be prepared this time, I promise." I could see it in his eyes that he meant what he said. "Besides," he added. "It could take years for you to remember the oracle details."

"Really?" I asked. For some reason, I had expected the memories to come back much sooner. I could remember Gabe in vivid detail. I decided to ask him about it. "So do you know why my memories of you came back to me so quickly?"

He grinned. "I thought that was obvious. It's because you love me."

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. I had obviously drawn my earlier conclusion together too soon. It turned out Gabe was a little conceited.

"Try not to reflect on it, if you can help it," he told me a few moments later in a more serious tone. "You need to distance your mind from your memories."

I snorted and raised a brow to let him know what I thought of his advice. "And just how am I supposed to do that?"

"Well, I suppose I could help with that."

"How could you possibly help?"

"I'm planning to do my best to keep your mind occupied."

Taking me by surprise, Gabe moved closer and lightly touched his lips to mine. Then, he gathered me in his arms as he kissed me deeply.

Afterwards, I was left warm and shaken.

But sure enough, he was right, because I couldn't even begin to think straight. In my opinion, it was a good plan.

EPILOGUE

Three years later...

I couldn't breathe.

It was the first thing I became aware of after waking up from my nightmare.

I struggled to find my breath, and tore the bed sheets off of me in a frenzied panic. I couldn't see anything through the inky darkness. I tried to focus my vision, desperately searching for something familiar, because I couldn't remember where I was. More importantly, I couldn't remember what year I was in.

I held my hands to my throat, as if doing so would somehow will the air to go back into my lungs.

Someone suddenly slapped my back and I swayed forward.

"Breathe, Lo!"

The impact opened my airways, causing a rush of air to plunge inside my lungs. I gasped several times.

"That's it, baby. Keep breathing."

Gabe's voice calmed my chaotic senses, as it always had. I sputtered and coughed a few times, but eventually my breathing slowed to a normal pace. Hearing Gabe's soothing voice and feeling his warm hand patting my back steadily brought me back to the present. Through the blackness of the night, I glimpsed my glittering

engagement ring I wore on my left hand. The sight of it verified my present surroundings.

I stood up, running my hands through my hair. A new anxiety took over as I began to remember the dream I'd just been in. I opened the door to the balcony, letting the gentle sea breeze sweep over my clammy skin. I stared out into the sea drearily. We'd just moved to Miami only three days ago. There were still unpacked boxes scattered throughout our condo. Gabe was supposed to start his new position tomorrow in the Homicide Bureau at the Miami-Dade Police Department. And I was supposed to begin my first semester of college later this month.

This couldn't be happening- *not now*. Not when our lives were so sweetly perfect.

"Lola, what is it?" Gabe asked. His voice was concerned, yet he still sounded sleepy. He was going to hate to hear this. But he had to know. I had no other choice but to tell him.

"I remembered."

Almost instantly, he woke up. I watched as his dark gray eyes turned hard and apprehensive.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded dimly. I couldn't even bear looking at him. The fear of losing him was already setting in. My eyes watered at the thought. I turned away, facing the ocean again. I listened to the oncoming waves, trying to regain my composure.

"Hey, don't worry," he said as he moved closer to me. He wrapped his heavy arms around my waist. "Everything is going to be

okay this time. We have a plan, remember? I have a bag packed. We can be ready to go in ten minutes, tops."

I sighed miserably. "I was really looking forward to college. This nursing program is one of the best in the country."

"Don't count that out yet." He was trying to sound positive, even though I could see he was scared as hell, just like I was. "You'll eventually get there. This might cause a slight delay, but you'll get there."

I smiled, but tears fell down my cheek anyway. "Gabe, it's not what you think."

"What do you mean?"

"The oracle, it's not a crystal like everyone assumes."

I could see confusion spreading over his features, even in the darkness.

"What are you saying?" he asked me. He tilted my chin upwards, so I would face him. "If it's not a crystal, than what is it?"

I swallowed, choosing my next words very carefully.

"It's a person. The oracle is a. . .girl."

The End

Foretell

If you could provide anyone with the path to their deepest, darkest desires, would you?

Estelle Spencer has no choice.

With just a simple touch of her hand, wishes and dreams are instantly fulfilled. Her voice speaks of its own accord, lighting the way to good fortune.

But not everyone's fortunes are desirable.

For most of her life Estelle hides in fear, living as a recluse in her sister's shadow. Until the day comes when her existence is remembered.

Forced into running, Estelle meets Rex, a Romanian gypsy, and the only person who can help her hide. Together they search for a way to end the curse that controls Estelle's life.

Before she destroys the world.





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Lola Moori is hiding a secret she doesn't know she's keeping.

She begins to remember someone. Someone important. His name is Gabe...and whatever they shared, she could feel that it was epic.

Yet it seems Gabe wanted her to forget him. Forever.

The curse that repressed Lola's memories for the span of several lifetimes is coming undone. But unfortunately, she discovers that some secrets are better left buried.

